

MARILYN *and Her* BOOKS

THE LITERARY LIFE OF
MARILYN MONROE

GAIL CROWTHER



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*For my mother,
who reads more books than anyone I know*

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but in the end books are not luxuries so much as necessities...

—PAUL AUSTER

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INTRODUCTION

Marilyn and Her Books

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In Western culture there are few people more sought after than Marilyn Monroe. One hundred years after her birth, Monroe's shimmering, whirling loveliness does not fade. Neither does the fascination with every aspect of her life and death. Her films endure. She inspires art, literature, music, and fashion. Marilyn Monroe is everywhere.

But responses to Monroe's legacy are complex. She is adored, she is mocked, she is the punchline to a joke, she is venerated, she is a shorthand stereotype for misogyny. Her body (both living and dead) is scrutinized and judged. She's too fat, she's too thin. She's beautiful. She's stupid. After she died, the mortician announced to the press that she needed a manicure and that her roots were showing. She was slovenly. She was immaculate. She left crumbs in bed. She wore Vaseline on her face. In the years that Marilyn was alive just about every feature of her physicality was dissected. But one aspect of Monroe that received hardly any attention at all—mainly because it was assumed to be nonexistent—was her mind.

When Marilyn Monroe's possessions were packed up after her death there were the sort of things you may expect, though perhaps for a star of Marilyn's caliber, not in the quantities you might imagine: dresses, furs, and some jewelry. There were cosmetics and hair curlers, silks, opera coats, black suede gloves, all the items that turned Marilyn into Marilyn. But by far and away the greatest number of objects belonging to Marilyn Monroe were her books. There were over four hundred of them in her personal library. These books, some dating from her childhood, had followed Marilyn around from one address to another. This may not seem like such a big deal until you discover that in her thirty-six years of life, Marilyn lived in at least forty-nine different places.

This creates a particular sort of poignancy for a woman who was always known and celebrated for her beauty, her body, and her assumed ditziness. The idea of her being an avid reader who packed up and devotedly transported her books from place to place seems very at odds with the persona of a giggling, playful scatterbrain. Neither did it fit with the cultural humor of the time:

“Joke” 1:

What do you call a blonde with one brain cell?

Normal

“Joke” 2:

What do you call a blonde with two brain cells?

Pregnant

“Joke” 3:

How do blond brain cells die?

Alone

The obsession with blondes and brain cells (or lack thereof) was as pervasive then as it is now. So, there is even more poignancy when you consider that one of Marilyn's greatest fears was being mocked in this way. In one of the last interviews she gave before her death she told the journalist, “Please don't make me a joke.... I don't mind making jokes, but I don't want to look like one.” It must be uniquely exhausting to be mocked for the very thing that prods and pokes your deepest insecurities. Reading, for Marilyn, was a safe space, not only somewhere she could be alone, but perhaps more importantly somewhere away from the judgments and assumptions. “If you are ignorant,” she said, “books won't laugh at you.” But Marilyn was not ignorant. She was, in fact, extremely well read, and ironically probably more well read than many of the people passing opinions on her supposed lack of intelligence.

After her death, Marilyn's more than four hundred books, taken from her home in Brentwood, Los Angeles, and her apartment in Sutton Place in Manhattan, were boxed up and put in storage for thirty-seven years. They were placed in white coffin-shaped boxes. Most of her estate and possessions (around seventy-five percent) had been left to her beloved acting coach Lee Strasberg. Perhaps not quite knowing what to do with them, he kept them locked away. When Strasberg died in 1982, Marilyn's personal property then passed into the hands of Anna Strasberg, Lee's third wife, whom he married in 1967, five years after Marilyn's death. Anna Strasberg had never really known Marilyn but described the two of them as being “acquainted.” They met once in 1960, only briefly, in a formal context when Monroe visited the headquarters of the United Nations, where Strasberg was working. It is clear, though, that she grew to know Marilyn through the stories told by her husband. In some ways this emotional distance allowed Strasberg to take a more active approach to Monroe's legacy, and she struck deals worth tens of millions of dollars first with CMG Worldwide, then later Authentic Brands Group, to represent the estate of Marilyn Monroe, branding her name and image. In 1999 as part of this endeavor, Anna Strasberg commissioned Christie's auction house in New York to catalogue and sell all of Monroe's memorabilia and personal property. The boxes, which had stayed in storage for so many years, were unpacked and the contents photographed, then listed with reserve prices.

For anybody who has worked in an archive, or handled the personal possessions of dead people, it is quite a moment unpacking or pulling items out of a box. So many senses are engaged as you brush the metaphorical (and sometimes physical) dust away to encounter the eerie remains of somebody else's life. There is touch, there is smell—often especially strong if the person was a smoker—and there is sight. Marilyn's books were in relatively good condition. Some contained annotations and marginalia; others had slight tears in the dust jackets or fell open to certain pages. Here were books that had been read,

with evidence that Marilyn was an active and engaged reader. Her cookbook contained newspaper cuttings of recipes and handwritten instructions. By all accounts, Marilyn was no great cook. When she attempted to make homemade noodles and they didn't dry out in time, she took her portable hair dryer to them to "speed up the process." (Note: it worked.) *The New Joy of Cooking* by Irma S. Rombauer and Marion Rombauer Becker (1953) was torn in the top right-hand corner, and the cream cover was stained like many recipe books that are used in a kitchen. Unlike most recipe books, however, this was listed with a reserve price of between \$500 and \$700. It sold into private hands for \$29,900.

The range of books in Marilyn's library was astonishing. Often the type of books a person chooses to read can tell us something about their personality. Do they stick to one genre or are they an adventurous reader? Do they have a favorite author? How are their books arranged on the shelf? Do certain books reflect certain biographical moments? Marilyn and her books raise many questions because exploring her literary life is a questioning venture.

Photographs show that in her apartments and hotel suites she often kept her bookshelves within reaching distance of her bed. She also seemed to favor snug reading places: wide, squishy armchairs, outdoor loungers in shady spots, or sofa beds with thick satin covers. She almost always looked comfortable when she was reading. We know she read on film sets between takes and we know that she liked to walk around with books under her arm. Some saw this as performative, that somebody "like Marilyn" couldn't possibly be reading the large volume of Proust she carried around. This raises questions that need to be explored about snobbery: What makes an "ideal" or appropriate reader? Why are certain books regarded as untouchable? Why can't a woman be beautiful, sexual, and a serious reader? Why do some people find it so hard to believe that Marilyn loved reading? These are some of the hardest questions to answer because the source material is so limited. Despite Marilyn being one of the most-photographed women in the world who the media rarely left alone, people didn't ask her what she was reading since most presumed she did not. Time and again we come back to the same sources—the set of *The Misfits* and *The Prince and the Showgirl*. These two films were where the people around her, such as the photographer Eve Arnold and the journalist William J. Weatherby, actually took an interest in her literary life. Most others did not. Now is the time to ask the long overdue questions about what Marilyn loved to read and explore just what her personal library meant to her.

Often books can place someone firmly in their historical and cultural moment. Did Marilyn read books that were popular at the time? Did she know any writers, and what impact did she have on them? Were any famous writers fans of hers, and if so, how did that make her feel? A striking photograph of Marilyn was taken by Milton H. Greene at his home in Beverly Glen, Los Angeles, in June 1956. It shows her sitting in an armchair at a cocktail party wearing a black spaghetti-strap dress, one arm raised above her head. She radiates the only source of light and is surrounded by people leaning in, staring at her with huge smiles on their faces. This typically depicted any gathering where Marilyn was present, whether with friends, writers, or political figures. Marilyn's orbit drew people in from all walks of life and writers were no exception: Vladimir Nabokov, Dylan Thomas,

Carson McCullers, Edith Sitwell, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jean Cocteau. They all adored her. She was, of course, married to one of America's most famous playwrights. Did Arthur Miller have any bearing on Marilyn's reading habits, despite them only being married for five years? There is a story that when the marriage ended, she returned to their apartment on Sutton Place to find he had cleared out his study. All the bookshelves were empty apart from a photograph of her holding a rose taken by Cecil Beaton, which she had given Miller as a gift. There is a hollowness, a loss, when a room previously full of books is emptied out. The acoustics echo. I wonder how long it took her to fill the shelves again.

This raises questions about the ways in which books for a personal library are acquired. Is there a favorite bookstore? Are the books bought or gifted? A personal library tells us something about the person who owns it, for they are not only reader but librarian too, in charge of all the decision-making. Cultural critic Walter Benjamin wrote about the enchantment of collecting books, the magical aspect of flicking through pages deciding whether your imagination is sparked or not. Each book, he claims, has its own fate, travels on its own journey, and sits jostling on a shelf against other books. Who you put your books in conversation with is telling. Do you let them speak to each other alphabetically? Or are they grouped by color or size? Do all the poets sit together, with biographers on another shelf? Or is there a real scattergun approach, with scientists next to French novelists?

These questions about acquisition raise interesting ideas about what a personal library is used for. There could be many purposes, some overlapping, such as pleasure, entertainment, research, study, and escapism. Did the books Marilyn read feed into her acting or did she keep the two things completely separate? Obviously, she read film scripts, and some of those scripts (also now sold) were covered in notes and thoroughly annotated with instructions. But reading professionally feels different from reading for pleasure or education. There is a different purpose and meaning. Books raise as many questions as they answer. But they can provide a unique insight into someone's mind, their intellectual pursuits and scholarly interests. This book will delve into these questions to see what we can discover.

All of Marilyn's surviving books sold in 1999. Most went into unknown, private hands. One generous, anonymous woman from Boston purchased five books and then donated them to the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. The books were works each written by an American woman: *My Antonia* and *Lucy Gayheart* by Willa Cather; *The Portable Dorothy Parker* by Dorothy Parker; *The Ballad of the Sad Café* by Carson McCullers; and *The Little Disturbances of Man*, a collection of short stories by Grace Paley. In January 2000, the library put the books on public display and the then-acting director, Jane Knowles, said, "We are thrilled to receive these books from the library of Marilyn Monroe. This just goes to prove that there was more to Marilyn Monroe than the movie star and popular icon. She was also a reader. We are delighted to add her books to those of other illustrious women at the Schlesinger Library."

Another of Marilyn's books, her copy of *The Fall* by Albert Camus, was bought by

Monroe scholar Elisa Jordan, who spoke movingly about attending the Christie's auction. She made a whole week's vacation of the event and sat through hours and hours of the auction believing she would never be able to buy anything as the bids soared. For example, Marilyn's red leather copy of the Bible with some pencil annotations sold for \$37,950. Her white baby grand piano, which had once been owned by the actor Fredric March, sold for \$662,500 (to Mariah Carey). Toward the end of the day, Jordan miraculously found herself winning an item and left Christie's clutching one of Marilyn's books, the Camus, and an empty bank account: "I remember walking home to the hotel, it [the book] was wrapped in tissue in a paper bag and just clutching it to my chest, so afraid someone was going to take it away from me." Jordan explained why it was important to her to buy one of Marilyn's books: "Because that's what she meant to me, that's what I was willing to do just to feel a little closer to her. And I realize that sounds extreme to some people and that's fine. We all spend our money on something that's special to us. That's what I chose to spend my money on."

Jordan raises a powerful argument here because personal possessions of the dead do hold a peculiar and emotional fascination. In the absence of the person who once owned them, they can act as a strange surrogate, a melancholy replacement for the person gone. Think of the lasting appeal of Marilyn's things. A dress, flesh-colored and glittering with gems, almost warm, still holding the shape of her missing body. A hairbrush containing platinum strands from a head that it will never brush again. A watch strap or belt with well-worn notches showing waist size and wrist width. Half-used makeup jars, household bills, signed checks, crockery, furniture, the pathos of a bottle of prescription pills. These objects retain power. Even the most mundane objects can flare to life when we see them through the lens of their cultural biographies, because each item left behind is inextricably linked to the life of the owner. If that owner happens to be Marilyn Monroe, then the social significance becomes even greater. It is upsetting if they become lost, damaged, or disrespected. In 2022, when Kim Kardashian wore Marilyn's dress to the Met Gala, there was justifiable outrage at the damage this inflicted on the precious but delicate garment. Items such as these are irreplaceable.

Sometimes we are even offered stories as to where these items were and when: A pill bottle on the bedside table the last night of Marilyn's life. A dress worn in a particular scene of a film. A pot of face cream captured in a photograph on a dressing table. Shoes she wore stepping off the plane in England to film *The Prince and the Showgirl*. The fate of other items seems to echo real moments in Marilyn's life—the elegant black cocktail dress she wore at the press conference to announce her engagement to Arthur Miller did not survive thirty-seven years in storage. It had been eaten by moths. When unpacked, a once-beautiful thing crumbled to nothing, much like their marriage.

At the point of death, these objects move from Marilyn's private and personal spaces into public and commercial domains, though in this case most of her things stayed in storage limbo for almost forty years. But once unpacked, nothing, it seems, is too small, too trivial, or too intimate to be sold. In 2005, Julien's Auctions in Los Angeles had a series of lots selling forty-one of Marilyn's (used) brassieres. Somebody paid almost \$6,000 to own one of Monroe's undergarments. Nothing is too unworthy to be handled

or stroked.

But what is it we are searching for in objects, such as clothes or books, that belonged to Marilyn? Do we imagine spectral traces of her left behind? Ghostly fingerprints? Skin cells? Are we trying to capture some bodily echo and essence from the past? Or as Jordan says, is it some way in which to feel closer to her? When someone dies, the things they leave behind form a kind of vacuum, and this space becomes filled with our longings, desires, and imagination. When people handle Marilyn's things, they are searching for some connection to her, hoping in some way that her possessions will reveal *something*. Perhaps even on some level that they will mysteriously reanimate and bring her back. But equally, by preserving her things, it is a form of honoring her memory, showing love and respect for her and her legacy.

But buying Marilyn's books back in 1999 also served another purpose. The auction, in total, raised \$13,405,785, with Marilyn's books alone comprising around \$600,000 of that amount. The funds raised from her personal library were donated to benefit Literacy Partners, a nonprofit organization in New York dedicated to promoting adult literacy. Marilyn, who loved reading so much, ensured that others could join her in that pursuit.

And it is a pursuit that serves so many purposes, as Marilyn herself discovered. Reading can be a time of solitude, which if you are on display for most of your life, is probably even more invaluable. It can also act as a form of escape—there is nothing quite like shutting out the horrors of the world by falling into the pages of a book. But it is more than this. Writer Nora Ephron summed up the multifaceted aspects of reading when she said, “Reading is escape, and the opposite of escape; it’s a way to make contact with reality after a day of making things up, and it’s a way of making contact with someone else’s imagination after a day that’s all too real. Reading is grist. Reading is bliss.” This is especially true for a writer, but presumably for an actor too, who sometimes spends months at a time making things up and pretending to be somebody they are not. Reading can be informative, comforting, shocking, moving, creative, life-changing, and enraging. For Ernest Hemingway (who featured in Marilyn's library), “there is no friend as loyal as a book.”

Very often reading can be dreamy and otherworldly. It is this aspect of reading that is especially interesting in relation to Marilyn Monroe. People often described her as looking at and engaging with them but appearing as if her mind were elsewhere, her gaze somehow simultaneously taking them in and looking through them. This Monroe dreaminess transmits strongly in her on-screen appearances and in photographs and somehow seems a perfect fit for the type of daydreaming we enjoy when reading a book. Think of running your hands along a bookshelf. All the stories, all the possibilities, all the voices, all the worlds. Because when you read a book, anything can happen. When you open a book, real life can be suspended. When you daydream, there are no rules, and you can change the story. You can speculate. You can be anywhere doing anything, and you do not need to explain it. What never happened can happen in your daydream and you can learn things. In your daydream, Marilyn might still be reading her books, snacking carelessly and leaving crumbs in the bed with a face full of Vaseline as she turns the pages of *The Brothers Karamazov*. People and places who are gone can come back. In your

daydream...

PROLOGUE

Daydreaming and Shelf-Snooping



In front of me are two unusual wooden, scalloped-topped gates. They resemble a child's painting of the ocean, wavy. To the right of the gateposts on a whitewashed wall is a house number, 12305. I am at the end of a cul-de-sac in my daydream. The evening sun in Los Angeles is warm and starting to drop in the sky. It doesn't matter how I get through the gates because anything can happen in a daydream; you can pass through places, you don't have to worry about locks or keys. Suddenly you can be on the other side of the gates on a redbrick path in a small compound built in 1929. The style is Spanish colonial. The garage has a terra-cotta-tiled roof, and to the right is a guest casita separated from the main L-shaped hacienda house. A path leads from the garage to the front door. I remember Marilyn telling a journalist, "I don't know if you noticed, there are fourteen red stone squares leading to my front door, where there is a ceramic tile coat of arms with the motto *Cursum Perficio*, meaning 'the end of my journey.' I hope it is true."

Marilyn is not here. There is a key to her house in the small walled garden that separates the guesthouse from the main house. She planted an herb garden here, and shrubs native to Mexico that she researched in one of her gardening books. Before I slide the key into the lock I look down at the tiled motto. It is made of four smaller tiles laid together to form a larger square, with a shield and flamboyant flourishes and three long leaping animals. I cannot say how often Marilyn has stepped over this because this daydream is outside of time. It could be five months. It could be fifty years. I do not think with Marilyn that there will ever be an end to her journey.

The lock turns easily, and I open the door into a cozy living room. I walk up one quarter-circle step and face a fireplace surrounded by lively Mexican tiles. A fire is burning despite the heat outside. The wood shifts and throws up sparks. The house is silent. To my right against the wall is a wooden settee bench. In the center of the room are low-slung chairs and a cocktail table with a leather top. A copy of *Horticulture* magazine is flung across it. Marilyn enjoyed reading and researching gardens. On either side of the living room is an arch-shaped doorway. I do not know which way to turn first.

I turn left. There is a small dining room with a table and matching chairs with leather seats. A hardwood chest holds Marilyn's linens, silverware, and crockery. On the wall is a leaded copper mirror and a painting called *Thistles #7* by Nova Taylor. An unusual star-shaped chandelier hangs from the ceiling. I recognize the windows from a photo shoot Marilyn did in 1962, black, leaded. She was balancing on a chair and holding on to a ceiling beam.

To the right of the dining room is a sunroom. There is an Aztec tapestry on the wall and a multitier glass drinks cabinet, another low-slung table and chairs. A gold Magnavox portable television sits in here and shows thirteen channels. When Marilyn couldn't sleep, which was often, she watched old movies late at night. I see French doors leading outside into the garden, but I will come back later to explore.

I walk back through the dining room to the kitchen, a riot of Mexican tiles and nooks and wall-mounted plank benches with tasseled cushions. A blue fridge is painted to match the tiles. I see well-used cookbooks propped open on kitchen counters, bursting with newspaper cuttings and Marilyn's notes. There are colorful glasses, copper pots, and enamel cookware.

I turn and walk through the kitchen, the dining room, the sunroom, and out through the doors into the garden, where I see a kidney-shaped pool surrounded by sun loungers. Marilyn liked to read out here. Small stuffed toys litter the lawn. I imagine these must be for Maf, Marilyn's dog. A slight breeze disturbs the air and a faint tinkling noise echoes around the pool area. I remember the poet Carl Sandburg bought antique bronze wind chimes for Marilyn to hang in the trees around her pool. She knew writers, I think. They loved her. Back through the rooms to the living area. I see flashes of books: Russian literature, D. H. Lawrence, Carson McCullers, Seán O'Casey, a book by Elizabeth Bowen about Rome. I look to see what is on the shelves. How does Marilyn arrange her books? Are they by genre? Author? Alphabetically? Randomly?

In the living room the other arch-shaped doorway leads to a guest bedroom and a bathroom adjoining Marilyn's dressing room. None of these rooms contain books, though they are quiet and cool. I slip into Marilyn's bedroom. There is a triangular kiva fireplace in the corner and an adjoining bath so full of jaunty tiles it seems to move. Squares, swirls around the sink, tub, and shower, in blues, yellows, oranges. A white towel with *M* embroidered in the corner hangs from a rail. There is a large wooden dresser in the bedroom with handles that resemble tassels, and a small round bedside table contains a lamp and a pile of books. One of them is Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The room is very tidy.

There are no prescription pill bottles.

Marilyn's bed has a champagne-colored cover, thick and plush. The window opposite her bed looks out across the redbrick path leading from the front gate. Everything is orderly. This is the house of a woman who is in control of her life.

I walk back to the living room. I am imagining Marilyn. The fire crackles and warms my legs and I decide to read a book. There are plenty to choose from. Over four hundred books, maybe more. I start to shelf-snoop.

I realize in my daydream that Marilyn's house is a perfect space to fill with imagination. Her rooms evoke feelings and memories. The existing black-and-white photographs from when she first moved in show her modest vision. "It's small," she said, "but I find it rather cozy that way. It's quiet and peaceful—just what I need right now." The poetics of the house feel intimate, these rooms now both existing and not. Anywhere can exist in a daydream, even if it is long gone. "How can... rooms that have disappeared become abodes for an unforgettable past?" asks the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. Marilyn's house has suspended time, and I am in it. I see her things, I see what could have been. I see a house bursting with books and culture and safety. A house will shelter, Bachelard promises, and protect its inhabitants. You can daydream a future, make every object in the house anew. "Daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity." When you unlock a door, you walk into

a daydream, and if you walk into infinity then time has no hold, no meaning.

This is also true of reading. I look at Marilyn's bookshelves; I see the scope of her reading and I have so many questions. In the evening light I see reflections from the swimming pool ripple across the ceiling. I hear the poet's wind chimes. The fire continues to shift in the grate. I find in my hand Marilyn's copy of *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*. I know she met him. I know she cooked for him. And I know she got drunk with him. I think of his poem where time is presented as a thief stealing things and people away: "Cast back the bone of youth / And salt-eyed stumble bedward where she lies."

Nobody here is with Dylan's thief of time, nobody is captured lying, dying, in bed, forever. Instead, a cheerful fire crackles in the grate and everything is possible. I have a whole personal library to explore. And so many questions.

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Where did Marilyn get her books?



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If you think about the biography of your own bookshelves, you can probably remember where you bought certain books and why. Other books on your shelves will have been gifted or perhaps inscribed to you from friends and family. Some books may be signed by the author; others could be previously owned or bought from a used bookstore. Some you may have no memory whatsoever of where they came from, but they seem to have been on your bookshelf forever. In this sense, books act as a store for memories, and in some cases, forgetting. Opening the pages can transport us back to childhood, a wonderful vacation, or a miserable breakup. Some pages can be smeared with sunscreen or chocolate, or wrinkled where they have been dropped in the tub. Clusters of books can represent certain periods of time: your university years, a high school obsession, the chronological collection of a beloved author. Personal libraries form part of our autobiography because they were bought to be part of our lives. Sometimes they can even shape and guide us through difficult or joyful times. One of the many beautiful things about books is the way in which they can help us understand what we want our beliefs and values to be. In this way, they shape our identity. They can even reflect our morals (though not exclusively, as we often read books we disagree with). All in all, the books we own can be revealing. So, it is no surprise that in the case of Marilyn Monroe, her hundreds of books can give us an intimate glimpse into her life. More intimate even than her films or publicity photographs, where she often spent time pretending to be somebody else. Books can tell us who someone is and where they have been. But before we even get to that level of analysis, it is equally as interesting to wonder, Where did Marilyn get all her books from?

Imagine the scene: It is quite late, the air is sultry, and traffic and people are teeming down Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. The night is lit with neon, not least by a large red wheel on the roof of a building, circling the Dickensian figure of a portly gentleman in waistcoat and breeches, doffing his hat in welcome. The wraparound sign enveloping the wheel is shaped like the spine of a large open book. The store below is Pickwick Book Shop, and something of a Hollywood institution. First opened in 1938 at 6743 Hollywood Boulevard, the origins of this bookshop lay in its association with the film industry. Before finding its home in Hollywood, the business, opened by Louis Epstein in the 1920s, was first based in Long Beach, then downtown LA. It was called Epstein's Used Books. In the 1930s, a movie studio approached Epstein asking if they could rent five thousand books to be used as props in their films. They agreed to a rate of five cents per book for thirty days. When they finally returned the books about a year later, they made the mistake of trying to pay for only thirty days' hire. Epstein sued them for the full amount and won. But in a further twist, Epstein's lawyer, clearly armed with more information than us, refused to release the money to Epstein, claiming he would only use it foolishly and squander it on "buying more books and having a good time."

Instead, Epstein was told to find a property that would serve as a bookstore and the money would be released into escrow. This is how Pickwick Book Shop came to be, and notwithstanding its fractious start with the film industry, it was always a favorite with Hollywood insiders as well as literary figures who were working in town. It was not unusual to see F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, Humphrey Bogart, Orson Welles, and Marlene Dietrich visiting.

The first floor was full of new books; the second floor, used books. Imagine now the door opening and a figure entering. No doubt she will be wearing a headscarf, a loose shirt, perhaps even dark glasses despite the time of day, because this is Marilyn Monroe. Filming is over and she has free time. Driving from the Fox studio lot, her favorite downtime activity is to browse Pickwick Book Shop. She describes to friends how she lovingly walks the aisles, randomly pulling books from the shelves and opening them until she finds a page or a paragraph she likes. "Is that terrible?" she asks, as though there is some accepted or appropriate way to choose books. If she likes what she reads, then she will buy. It doesn't matter what the book is about because Marilyn reads widely—science, religion, politics, psychology, French literature, Russian literature, biography, contemporary fiction, poetry, plays, even books about gardening.

Despite being well read, her love of reading seems to be perpetually met with skepticism. When she was filming *All About Eve* (1950) with director Joseph L. Mankiewicz, he noticed that she was carrying a copy of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* around the set, and he asked her about it. She told him, "Every now and then I go into the Pickwick and just look around. I leaf through some books, and when I read something that interests me, I buy the book. So last night I bought this one." For reasons he doesn't really explain, this shocked Mankiewicz. In fact, he claimed he would have been less shocked to find Rilke studying a "Marilyn Monroe nude calendar," which perhaps gives us the explanation we need. The next day, Marilyn, who must have known on some level what people were thinking, kindly sent Mankiewicz a copy of the Rilke book. This could be read as an example of Marilyn's supposed "childlike innocence." Equally, it could be read as a fuck-you act of resistance reflecting Marilyn's observation that "I've never fooled anyone. I've let people fool themselves. They didn't bother to find out who and what I was. Instead, they would invent a character for me. I wouldn't argue with them."

Marilyn wasn't always alone when she visited bookstores. In 1951, after they met on the Twentieth Century-Fox lot but before they were a couple, she went with Arthur Miller to buy a copy of his play *Death of a Salesman* from an unnamed store in Los Angeles. Miller recalled that although Marilyn wasn't dressed as *Marilyn*, she still garnered attention as she browsed the shelves. As well as buying his book, she picked up copies of Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, and E.E. Cummings. ("I read poetry to save time," she once said.) Miller described how while she was leafing through various books, a man watching her started to furtively masturbate, though thankfully Marilyn didn't notice. Instead, she was reading Cummings's poetry, mouthing the words and laughing in an unaffected way at his unusual turn of phrase. Miller said she reminded him of a student afraid of being caught out, but as she studied the words a look of "naïve wonder" crossed her face. It's an interesting interpretation for a woman in her midtwenties who

was as well read as Marilyn. Is it possible her “naivety” was instead delight at finding a new writer she admired?

We can build a picture of where some of Marilyn’s books came from partly through these stories told about her, but also by looking at inscriptions in her books and exploring in detail some of her financial paperwork. While this doesn’t account for her entire personal library, it does at least give a flavor of the origins of some of her books.

Pickwick Book Shop wasn’t the only store where Marilyn bought books. She was photographed, for instance, in Martindale’s Book Store on Santa Monica Boulevard by André de Dienes in 1953. Resplendent in a black fitted suit and white gloves, Marilyn is pictured reading a copy of *The Big Brokers* by Irving Shulman, a novel about three men from New York who take on a gambling syndicate in Las Vegas. This photo also allows us to peek inside a bookstore that no longer exists, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, a wooden-beamed ceiling, and a stylish curved cash register counter.

When Julien’s Auctions sold a collection of Monroe’s financial papers, a large wad of receipts was included, listing detailed information such as where and when Marilyn bought books. White, cream, pink, and yellow receipt slips show purchases made at Doubleday Book Shop in New York, Martindale’s Book Store in LA, Beekman Place Book Shop in New York, Hunter’s Books in Beverly Hills, E. Weyhe, Inc. of New York, Clapp & Tuttle Books and Art in Connecticut, Hammacher Schlemmer in New York, Wepplo’s Book Store in LA, and from Lee Freeson, an LA-based dealer in rare books related to the theater. These receipts reflect the split in Monroe’s professional and personal life, some being addressed to Miss Marilyn Monroe, others to Mrs. Arthur Miller or a combination of both, Marilyn Monroe Miller. The books she bought were eclectic: classic literature, an encyclopedia of gardening, a collection of Van Gogh’s great period, and a copy of *I, Rachel* by March Cost, described as a biographical novel of the immortal Rachel, the greatest French actor of her time (the nineteenth century). This final book did not appear in Monroe’s personal library, so somewhere along the way it was lost or loaned and never returned.

These receipts also reveal where Marilyn was living when she bought certain books. For example, on March 10, Martindale’s Book Store sold *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, volumes I, II, and III, to Marilyn Monroe Miller for \$28.86. She was staying in Bungalow 21 at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Although the receipt does not contain a year, we know it was 1960 since it was during this time that the Monroe-Millers were living next door to Yves Montand and Simone Signoret in Bungalow 20 for the filming of *Let’s Make Love*. Maybe it is no surprise that Marilyn was brushing up on Freud given her big musical number in that film was “My Heart Belongs to Daddy.” Another book she bought around this time simply says “Yves Montand,” so it seems she was reading up on her costar too.

Another receipt, dated October 29, this time charged to the Bel Air Hotel, lists a copy of *The Great Gatsby* bought with *Dance to the Piper*, a memoir by Agnes de Mille about her desire to become a dancer against the wishes of her family and her subsequent success as a choreographer. It is interesting that at this time Monroe was reading about women in the industry making their way against the odds. But again, her reading was wide. She was

also buying *The Collected Stories of Dorothy Parker* and a book called *Peace in Piccadilly: The Story of Albany*, about a prestigious set of bachelor apartments established in London in 1802 and inhabited by such luminaries as the poet Lord Byron and the prime minister William Gladstone. Women are now allowed to apply as residents, though when the writer Sybille Bedford lived there, she stayed in Aldous Huxley's servant's room. It's possible Marilyn heard of this place while she was filming *The Prince and the Showgirl* in London since Terence Rattigan, who wrote the screenplay, had rooms there.

Marilyn didn't always turn up in person to buy her own books. One receipt from Martindale's Book Store dated April 20, 1960, shows several purchases including paper, cards, a magazine, and a book about Monet. The receipt is signed by Rudy Kautzky, who was Marilyn's hired limousine driver from Carey Cadillac Renting Company. Although in total Marilyn spent \$18.92, when this receipt went up for auction it sold for \$256. Rudy signed for many other books too, including *Marlene Dietrich*, *How to Live with a Cat*, *Siamese Cats*, a film annual, *My Father, Charlie Chaplin*, and *Sister Carrie*, a novel by Theodore Dreiser about a young woman who moves to a big city to realize the American dream, first becoming a mistress to powerful men and then becoming a famous actress. Rudy also signed for *The Color of Evening* by Robert Nathan, about an older artist who falls in love with a young girl and how it all fell apart. Fanny Butcher writing for the Sunday *Chicago Tribune* summed the book up as "for those who do their dreaming in their waking hours, it is a subtle, delicate, charming story of love." Perfect reading for Marilyn.

Some of the last books she bought on May 24, 1962, were in a batch from Martindale's in Beverly Hills, with the receipt sent to her new Brentwood address on Fifth Helena Drive. One entry, for \$17.50, is simply listed as "O'Neill." Given that Marilyn had more than one Eugene O'Neill play in her library, it may well be that she bought them all at the same time. *The Hairy Ape* is a play about the impact of industrialization and social class on the protagonist, Yank, a laborer based in New York City. *Long Day's Journey into Night* (of which Marilyn seemed to own two copies) is an autobiographical family drama that takes place in a seaside home in Connecticut where two brothers and their parents struggle to come to terms with one another's failings. Another entry on the receipt is "*Capt. Newman M.D.*," a book based on the experiences of Marilyn's psychiatrist, Dr. Ralph Greenson, during his time as an army doctor in Camp Colfax, Texas. It is one of the last books Marilyn read. The final entry on the receipt is "Skin from Teeth," most likely *The Skin of Our Teeth* by Thornton Wilder, a Pulitzer Prize-winning play that had been directed on Broadway by Elia Kazan, a friend of Marilyn's. Featuring Fredric March and Montgomery Clift, the play was seen as a three-part allegory about humanity but became most famous for breaking every established theatrical convention. Despite the modern setting, some scenes took place in an ice age and an encroaching apocalypse, which surely must have presented their own staging challenges.

Not all of Marilyn's books were purchases though. Some appear to have been gifted. For example, a significant book in Marilyn's library, *The Decisive Moment* (1952) by French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, was a first-edition hardcover, resplendent

with a dust jacket designed by Matisse. This book is regarded as one of the greatest photography books of the twentieth century, containing not only 126 works by Cartier-Bresson himself but also a philosophical essay about the art of photography. It is easy to see why Marilyn would cherish a book like this, given that every photographer who worked with her said she was one of the few people they photographed who knew as much about the composition of a picture as they did. She understood angles, light, how to pose; she knew exactly what to do to get the desired result. Like Cartier-Bresson, Marilyn realized that there was a decisive moment in taking a photograph, and one that for Cartier-Bresson was fragile and fleeting: "Photography is not like painting," he told *The Washington Post* in 1957. "There is a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture. Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera. That is the moment the photographer is creative. Oop! The Moment! Once you miss it, it is gone forever." Marilyn was notorious for demanding contact sheets from her photo shoots and scratching out, sometimes even cutting to shreds, the images that did not meet her approval. Her copy of *The Decisive Moment* appears to be gifted, or at the very least inscribed in French by Cartier-Bresson: "*a Madame Marilyn Monroe a Monsieur Arthur Miller / Avec mes hommages admiratif / Henri Cartier-Bresson.*" The fact it is dedicated to both Marilyn and Arthur Miller suggests that it was gifted to them on the set of *The Misfits*. The shooting of the film was photographed exclusively by Magnum photo agency, of whom Cartier-Bresson was one of the founders. During filming, two staff photographers were kept on set on a rotation basis, and Cartier-Bresson was one of them (along with others such as Eve Arnold and Inge Morath). They documented the difficult, strained months of shooting in intense heat in the Nevada desert; with Marilyn unwell and often late to the set, Miller was constantly rewriting scenes, meaning everyone had to relearn lines. The experience was later summed up by Marilyn: "*The Misfits* was a bad film because the script was bad." It is interesting to think about the journey of this book. Perhaps it was handed over on set in desert heat, or in a hotel room at the end of a long day's shooting. It was then shipped back to Los Angeles when filming wrapped. After Marilyn's marriage to Miller broke up, she kept the book, either in New York or California. Eventually in 1962 it was packed away for thirty-seven years in almost perfect condition, just some slight tears to the dust jacket at the top and bottom of the spine. On October 28, 1999, it was sold for \$19,550 and now lies somewhere in private hands.

Another book gifted to Marilyn was *The Flower in Drama and Glamour* written by Stark Young. Her copy is inscribed to her by her acting coach Lee Strasberg and reads, "*Christmas 1955 / To Marilyn — / Who has the one and will / soon possess the other — Love Lee.*" This book, which would have been newly published then, is about the art of acting, including advice on speech, tempo, how to convey wonder, directing, and stressing that acting is a craft that requires the exercise of the imagination and the airing of dreams. The introduction carries out a global savaging of acting styles country by country, claiming the English are too uptight to act properly and are better suited to writing literature. There are lots of terrible French actors apparently, but at least they have style. German actors are audacious and profound but have no sense of humor. Italian actors are beautiful and

natural, but also lazy, noisy, and use too many gestures, resulting in the devastating judgment that “no acting is worse than the worst Italian.” The book also consists of a series of letters written by Young to an array of actors (it is unclear if these were ever sent or merely for the purpose of the book). The first one, to Charlie Chaplin, summarizes Young’s view on Chaplin’s career and future, praising him for the clown he invented: “But you have finished your creation. It was perfect long ago. Already it begins to slow down. It shows a falling off in invention and zest...” Young proceeds to advise Chaplin on which roles he should undertake and warns him that his physical prowess is already on the wane, but following sound advice he “need not fail” in the future. It’s fascinating to consider the psychology behind gifting this book to Marilyn, an actor who constantly suffered from a lack of confidence. Was Strasberg trying to warn her of perceived pitfalls, or make himself indispensable in order to avoid them?

One inscribed book in Marilyn’s library directly relates to a personal moment in her life from 1956. A copy of *The Union Prayer-Book for Jewish Worship* was signed inside, “For Marilyn—with all of my best wishes and deepest respect—fondly, Bob.” This was Robert Goldburg, the rabbi who oversaw Marilyn’s conversion to Judaism upon her marriage to Miller. The prayer book is bound in black leather with MARILYN MONROE MILLER stamped on the front in gilt, gold lettering.

Another source of books for Marilyn appeared to be gifts directly from publishing houses. A dozen books in her personal library still retain the compliments slip or were advance reader copies. These books ranged from the humorous and frivolous to the serious and political, such as Elsa Maxwell’s *How to Do It, or, The Lively Art of Entertaining* (1957), *Merry Christmas, Happy New Year* (1958) by Phyllis McGinley, *The Contenders* (1958) by John Wain, Paul Scott’s *The Mark of the Warrior* (1958), and direct from the Czechoslovakian Embassy, Eleanor Wheeler’s *Lidice* (1957), a memoir of a Czech village where the inhabitants were executed by the Nazis in retaliation for Resistance activity. There is no record as to why she was sent these books—whether she requested copies herself, or whether the publisher sent them for publicity purposes.

Even just this snapshot of where some of Marilyn’s books came from shows how important stories and memories are to building a personal library. When Marilyn read her book about Marlene Dietrich, did she remember sending her driver to Martindale’s to collect it? Or when she browsed the wonderful photographs of Cartier-Bresson, did she recall the Nevada heat and unhappiness of *The Misfits* set? When reading the harsh pages of Stark Young, did she remember happy days spent in Strasberg’s apartment discussing the art of acting?

We also begin to get an idea of the sheer scope of Marilyn’s reading. And what is interesting is that this wide range of genres was frequently chosen in the same purchase. She was selecting books and authors that you do not often see together. This unpredictability is exhilarating, but it also shows that Marilyn was an adventurous reader and receptive to a multitude of voices.

Books, according to Walter Benjamin, are a little like maps that show places we have traveled but also roads where we have yet to go. Books can be the trigger or catalyst to new journeys, or even transformations. But buying the book is such an important part of this

process. “Ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects,” said Benjamin. But then he flips this expected relationship upside down, claiming books do not come alive in us, rather it is us who lives in them. This further reveals how personal libraries are part of our (auto)biographies, whether we bought the books ourselves or had them gifted. Books contain dust of the past. Books may well have inspired Marilyn, transformed her even, but she came alive and lived in their pages. Which means that if you own a copy of one of her books, you also own a shimmering piece of Marilyn dust.

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What sort of books did Marilyn read?



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The scope of Marilyn's personal library and the number of genres it contained was impressive. She read literature from all around the world, America, England, France, Germany, but certainly favored Russian novels. She enjoyed poetry, politics, psychology, plays, biographies, science, short stories, cookbooks, horticulture, contemporary novels, children's books, religion, crime, adventure, art, pets, music, reference, and self-help. She was probably one of the few readers in the world whose personal library contained a biography of herself (*Marilyn Monroe: Her Own Story*, 1961, by George Carpozi).

Despite this broad scope, there are some standout books and authors that Monroe clearly preferred. For example, she had poetry (*Selected Poems*), novels (*Sons and Lovers*—two copies), travel writings (*Etruscan Places*) and stories/essays/letters by D. H. Lawrence. Her library also contained a critical study exploring the themes in his work, *D. H. Lawrence: A Basic Study of His Ideas* by Mary Freeman, published in 1955. Covering subjects such as men, women, sex, money, labor, revolution, and fascism, the fact that Marilyn read an analysis of Lawrence and his work suggests her interest went deep. Curiously, his most notorious novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, is not listed in Monroe's library, though that does not mean she did not read it.

This omission is especially surprising because Marilyn appeared to have a taste for banned books. One of the most controversial books of the twentieth century, subsequently made into an equally controversial film by Martin Scorsese, was *The Last Temptation of Christ* by the Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis. This novel, first published in Greek in 1955 and translated into English in 1960, depicts Jesus as struggling with human temptations and desires and wondering if his ultimate sacrifice will be worth it. As he is dying on the cross, he imagines an alternate world where he lives a normal life as an ordinary man married to Mary Magdalene and suffering the gamut of human emotions. The novel ends with Jesus ascending to heaven having accepted his fate. Marilyn, who owned a copy, would have been reading this book soon after it was available in English and no doubt aware of the controversy it was creating. In 1955 the Greek Orthodox Church attempted to have all of Kazantzakis's books banned, calling the novel "coarse," "blasphemous," and "vulgar," and containing "evil slanders against the Godlike person of Jesus Christ... derived from the inspiration of the theories of Freud" (another Marilyn favorite). They also attempted to have Kazantzakis excommunicated, and although they failed in this endeavor, they did deny him full funeral rites when he died. The most expensive-selling book by Kazantzakis in the history of his publishing was a copy of *The Last Temptation of Christ* that sold for \$3,220 in 1999. The owner: Marilyn Monroe.

Marilyn sailed equally close to the wind with her political books, especially for 1950s Hollywood when McCarthyism (the Red Scare) was at its height, with intense anticommunist investigations and political repression. She read writers such as Lincoln Steffens, with his communist sympathies. She had a copy of *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx.

She also owned a copy of *Commonwealth vs. Sacco and Vanzetti* by Robert P. Weeks, which explored the controversial trial of two Italian American anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. In 1921 they had been found guilty of murdering a guard and a paymaster in Braintree, Massachusetts, during a shoe factory payroll robbery a year earlier and sentenced to death. Protests were carried out at the jail, where another Monroe favorite was present, none other than Dorothy Parker, who strolled down the street singing “The Internationale” and “The Red Flag” and ended up getting herself arrested for loitering and sauntering. Weeks’s book highlighted the problematic nature of the trial, not least because the judge had been overheard prior to hearing any evidence that he was determined to get the two men hanged. It may well be that Marilyn’s interest in left-wing politics was strengthened further after beginning her relationship with Arthur Miller. During their courtship in 1956, he was hauled in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee due to his leftist politics, where he claimed to have no knowledge of applying to become a member of the Communist Party and repeatedly refused to name others he had met at communist gatherings. But Marilyn was also surrounded by other people with similar sensibilities. Her acting coach Lee Strasberg and his wife Paula both had links to the Communist Party (Paula being a former member). By the 1960s, Marilyn’s psychiatrist, Dr. Ralph Greenson, and his family found her to be rather radical, claiming, “Marilyn was passionate about equal rights, rights for blacks, rights for the poor. She identified strongly with the workers, and she always felt they were her people.” At the same time, despite often being critical of domestic and foreign policies, Monroe was proudly American, and this too is reflected in her personal library, with books such as *America the Vincible* by Emmet John Hughes, an article editor for *Time-Life* and a speechwriter for Eisenhower, critiquing American policy. She also owned a copy of *American Rights: The Constitution in Action* by Walter Gellhorn, brother of Martha and well-known champion of civil rights. Monroe also tackled the classic text *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville, a French study of American society and an exploration of the threats to, and dangers of, democracy. Henri Cartier-Bresson noticed that Monroe had this strong air of Americanness about her, more so than other of her peers. On the set of *The Misfits* he observed, “She’s American, and it’s very clear that she is. She’s very good that way—one has to be very local to be universal.” He also noticed the extent to which she had been underestimated: “There’s something extremely alert and vivid in her, an intelligence.”

Fortunately (for Marilyn) she did allow herself a bit of light reading alongside this heavy material in the form of James Bond. Her fabulous first edition of Ian Fleming’s *From Russia, with Love*, the fifth James Bond book, was in immaculate condition, with a rose and gun on the cover, when it was sold at auction in 1999 for \$6,210. Chapter nineteen is called “The Mouth of Marilyn Monroe” and features a car chase around Istanbul as the dastardly Bulgarian assassin Krilencu attempts to escape capture by Bond via a hatch in an enormous billboard advertising Marilyn’s film *Niagara*. The escape hatch is concealed in Marilyn’s mouth. Bond observes the billboard, letting his eyes travel over the spectacle, “down the vast pile of Marilyn Monroe’s hair, and the cliff of forehead, and down the two feet of nose to the cavernous nostrils. A faint square showed in the

poster. It ran from below the nose into the great alluring curve of the lips. It was about three feet deep. From it, there would be a longish drop to the ground.” But Bond is rarely defeated and in this case he waits for the hatch to eventually open: “Out of the mouth of the huge, shadowed poster, between the great violet lips, half open in ecstasy, the dark shape of a man emerged and hung down like a worm from the mouth of a corpse.” Krilencu is, of course, shot dead. Sadly, this scene featuring Marilyn did not make it into the film, which was not made until six years later. She was replaced with Anita Ekberg in *Call Me Bwana* and a line of dialogue: “She has a lovely mouth, that Anita.” This isn’t the only connection between Fleming and Monroe though. Both were avid customers of Floris perfumers on Jermyn Street, London. Fleming wore Floris 126 and No. 89, and the store is mentioned in *Diamonds Are Forever*, *Dr. No*, and *Moonraker*. Both Fleming and his creation James Bond used Floris bath essence. Marilyn discovered Floris when she was in London filming *The Prince and the Showgirl* and bought six bottles of their Rose Geranium Toilet Water to be shipped back to Beverly Hills using the alias Miss Dorothy Blass. It’s even possible that Fleming and Monroe met since both stayed in the famous Jamaica Inn on Ocho Rios in the 1950s (along with half of Hollywood).

From the glamour of James Bond, Marilyn also read of glamorous lives in New York and the South of France, owning two novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*. The former is set on Long Island and deals with the enigmatic and mysterious millionaire Jay Gatsby. The latter is set on the French Riviera and chronicles the exploits of psychiatrist Dick Diver and his wife-patient Nicole (by all accounts two characters based on Scott Fitzgerald himself and his wife Zelda). Both novels deal with characters who are perceived to be rich, beautiful, and successful, with “ideal” lives, yet behind the facade are deeply unhappy, themes that were close to home for Monroe. Although Scott Fitzgerald died in 1940 when Marilyn was only fourteen, she did ultimately have a direct connection to him through his lover, Sheila Graham. Graham was a gossip columnist in Hollywood who reported on what everyone was up to, who was sleeping with whom, and how much they were all earning. Fitzgerald was with Graham at the time of his death; indeed he collapsed and passed away in her apartment in West Hollywood. Although Graham was mostly known for her journalistic work, she did write a memoir that ended up being filmed—*Beloved Infidel* (1959), based on her relationship with Scott Fitzgerald. If Marilyn ever owned a copy, it was not included with the rest of her personal library. The lead in the film was played by Gregory Peck, and the role of Graham was played by Deborah Kerr, but Graham had wanted Monroe to play the part, claiming, “Our lives had been similar in some respects.” When Graham listed the parallels, they were indeed striking and included a bleak, fatherless childhood, neither raised by their mother, time spent in orphanages, both had changed their names, both had married and divorced three times, both fell in love with major writers, and both hungered for more education. Graham also felt that, by necessity, the two of them had learned the power of their bodies and used men and sex to get ahead.

Sheilah Graham connected to Monroe via Russian literature too, both sharing a love of Dostoevsky. Marilyn’s library contained a considerable number of Russian novels and plays, including those by Tolstoy, Chekhov, Turgenev, and Pushkin, along with her

favorite, Dostoevsky. Of the latter she owned three novels, *Crime and Punishment*, *The House of the Dead*, and most significantly *The Brothers Karamazov*. (Weirdly, her copy was not included in her personal library, and there is no receipt of her buying it, but this was an important book to Marilyn.) In this final novel, which took Dostoevsky almost two years to write, the plot is essentially about patricide, with much philosophical speculation on doubt, faith, and reason. Marilyn's beloved D. H. Lawrence was critical of the book, but this seems mainly to have been based on his fraught rivalry with the long-dead Dostoevsky. Lawrence regarded both of them as being tormented by agonizing thoughts of Christ. We do not know whether Marilyn knew of this rivalry between two of her favorites. But what we do know is that Marilyn was very taken with one of the characters in the novel, Grushenka. Twenty-two years old, beautiful, and fiery, Grushenka is the object of desire for the father and one of his three sons, and she uses this conflict to her satisfaction. Despite desiring independence and control in her life, Grushenka realizes that in fact she loves Dmitri, the son, and a gentler side to her emerges (though she remains pretty feisty). Marilyn wanted to play Grushenka in a film version and had the courage to announce this at a press conference, prefacing her statement with "Don't laugh..." Already she knew "Marilyn Monroe" playing a Russian heroine would be mocked by literary snobs. And she was not wrong. The response from waiting journalists was "Can you spell it?," to which an annoyed Monroe replied, "Look it up. It starts with G." In 1958, Hollywood did film a version of the novel directed by Richard Brooks. Although rumors circulated that Monroe was in talks to play Grushenka, Brooks claimed negotiations fell through "because of her contractual demands and personal troubles." An MGM executive said that she was pregnant. Monroe's agent denied this and said that Marilyn had never been offered the part at all. The role was ultimately played by the Austrian-Swiss actor Maria Schell. But one of the few voices championing Marilyn, saying she would make a perfect Grushenka because she was born for the part, was Sheila Graham.

It is lucky that Marilyn had women fighting in her corner, because all too frequently men failed her. This included male writers Marilyn admired. She had in her library a copy of *On the Road* (1957) by Jack Kerouac, not surprising given her love of contemporary literature. The novel had been published to mixed reception, with one reviewer for *The New York Times* hailing its publication as a historical event, and another saying *On the Road* was on a road to nowhere. Kerouac, however, was undeterred and wrote to Marlon Brando saying the book should be filmed with Brando playing the role of Dean Moriarty and Kerouac himself playing Sal Paradise. Brando didn't reply. But one wonders whether Marilyn would have even bothered reading the book had she known how Kerouac would respond to her death in 1962. On August 11, just seven days after she died, Kerouac (who at the time was forty) wrote a letter in which he conducted an imaginary interview. He was asked, or rather asked himself, what he thought of Marilyn Monroe, and he replied that "she was fucked to death." When he asked himself to clarify this he wrote, "I understand Joe DiMaggio had a dong actually as long as a baseball bat... and that Arthur Miller had a dong as long as Robert Sherwood." (Robert Sherwood was a writer who was famous for being six foot eight.) His preoccupation with Marilyn's sexuality is revealing;

perhaps even as a middle-aged man he was making some sort of puerile joke, but it's hard not to side with Dorothy Parker, who had become friends with Marilyn—her attitude to the Beats being that she wished they would “beat off” somewhere else.

Marilyn got equally callous behavior from another of her favorite writers, Tennessee Williams. Her library contained copies of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (with Monroe's annotations and notes), *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, and *Camino Real*. She saw a production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. But her love of his work did not save her from his reflections after her death when he wrote an essay called “Marilyn Monroe Got What She Wanted.” He observed initially that “it's fine to cry for Marilyn Monroe. I did, and I still do,” which shows that he was certainly extremely fond of Marilyn and mourned her. (In fact, we know he wanted her to appear in one of his plays.) He continued, “She was tragic, but she was also lucky.” It's arguable whether she was either of these things, but he's entitled to his opinion. After the initial mourning, the essay takes a different turn, and he argues that there are “beautiful, sad, dumb girls” all over the world. Dumb? Anyway, according to Williams, these girls don't get what Marilyn got, a film career and adulation. (He also mentions bathing in perfume[?]) His advice is: “Look at the beauty, but move on. There is nothing else there. A pretty visage with a sad story.” If there is any tragedy in this story it is that Marilyn clearly valued his work, spending time poring over it, making notes and annotations, for him to merely dismiss her in this way. Maybe he didn't know this about her, her dedication to study and reading—especially his work—but that is no excuse to reduce a woman to how she looks with the claim there is nothing else beyond that. He concludes that in interviews Marilyn said that she wanted to be noticed and loved, so “I think Marilyn Monroe got what she wanted.” The irony here is we know of course that this is not true. Marilyn may well have been adored by her public, but could it be said that she was ever really loved and cared about in her personal life? “I am alone,” she said. “I am always alone no matter what.”

A man who showed much more compassion toward Marilyn, and who was one of her favorites, was the Irish writer Seán O'Casey. In her personal library Monroe owned *Red Roses for Me*, *I Knock at the Door*, *The Green Crow*, and *Selected Plays*. O'Casey had a lively history; born to Protestant parents, he was nevertheless committed to Irish nationalist causes and the plight of the working class. In 1926, the year Monroe was born, O'Casey had a play performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, *The Plough and the Stars*, highlighting the effect Irish nationalism and the Easter Rising had on the working classes. Because the play tackled issues such as sex, religion, and prostitution, there was a riot on the fourth night, and some actors refused to speak their lines. W. B. Yeats had to leap onstage to chastise the audience with the words “You have disgraced yourselves again!” The whole event quite naturally inspired O'Casey to become a full-time writer. After falling in love while he was in London to accept a writing prize, he eventually settled in Devon. It was with much delight that Marilyn claimed O'Casey had written a poem about her, though this has never made it into the public sphere. When she traveled to England to film *The Prince and the Showgirl*, she announced to the press that there were two writers she wanted to meet, Edith Sitwell and Seán O'Casey. For many years it was assumed she had not managed to see O'Casey, but in 2024 journalist Ian Handford,

writing for *Torbay Today*, confirmed that after decades of research he was able to say that both Miller and Marilyn visited O'Casey at his home in Villa Rosa, Trumlands Road, Torquay, in 1956. The son of a local journalist reported that his father had invited himself into the apartment building after discovering the Miller-Monroe visit. Sean O'Casey and Arthur Miller were in the study; Eileen Carey, O'Casey's wife, and Marilyn were sitting at the kitchen table. He greeted the biggest Hollywood star with her own career and production company with "Mrs. Miller, how nice to see you." To which she replied, with the potential interpretation of throwing shade, "Nobody ever called me that before. How nice."

Marilyn's Irish connection didn't end with O'Casey. Her library contained a copy of *The Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Probably the most moving story of Marilyn's engagement with this work comes from her friend the American poet Norman Rosten, who recounts what happened one night at a party in his home on Long Island. After dinner he passed around books by Walt Whitman and Yeats and invited each guest to read something by choice. Marilyn, he noted, loved poetry. He thought she regarded it as a shortcut leading directly to the heart of the experience. But she also loved verbal surprises, mischief, and mystery. He sensed that she understood on some level how poetry had an alliance with death. On this night at his house, Monroe opened a volume of Yeats at his poem "Never Give All the Heart." She read it aloud to the room slowly, letting the words sink in. When she finished there was a hush, and she stared into space. It is hard not to think of the impact the words would have had on Marilyn, perhaps in particular "For everything that's lovely is / But a brief, dreamy, kind delight."

A final favorite in Marilyn's library was Sigmund Freud. We know from her bookstore receipts that in 1960 she bought volumes I, II, and III of his *Life and Work*, and although these were not present in her collection at the time, in 1999 Christie's sold her copy of *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. But Marilyn had been reading Freud from as early as 1947, and on various film sets was eager to point out to people who flubbed their lines that they had made a Freudian slip. Marilyn's psychiatrist, Dr. Ralph Greenson, had trained in Vienna and Switzerland and was close to Freud's daughter, Anna. In 1961, the director John Huston, who had worked with Marilyn on *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) and *The Misfits* (1961), wanted Marilyn to play the part of Cecily, one of Freud's psychotic patients, in his forthcoming film *Freud* (1962). The screenplay was by French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who considered Marilyn to be one of the greatest actors alive. Sigmund Freud was to be played by Montgomery Clift, whom Marilyn had just finished working with on *The Misfits*. Greenson knew that Anna did not want the film to be made, so he advised Marilyn against taking the role. On letterheaded paper from the Beverly Hills Hotel, Marilyn wrote to Huston turning down the role, saying that she had it on "good authority" that the Freud family did not approve of the film and so she would not want to be a part of it because she had too much respect for his contribution to humanity, and because of her personal regard for his work. She wished him well though. The movie was made with Clift in the lead role and Susannah York playing Cecily. Jean-Paul Sartre withdrew from the film, with Huston regarding his script as too long to use.

While it is fascinating to ponder the extent of Marilyn's personal library and the variety of books she read, it is worth thinking about the impact of that scope of reading. Wide reading across genres offers several benefits, often specific ones connected to a particular type of reading. So, for example, nonfiction offers knowledge and critical thinking. Poetry and literature offer emotional intelligence and linguistic appreciation. Fiction offers empathy. Mystery offers imagination and pattern recognition. It can be no coincidence that Marilyn had all these qualities in abundance. Neither was she shy about discussing them and what she was reading. Scholar Elisa Jordan tells us that even when Monroe visited Madame Renna, "facialist of the stars," on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, her favorite topic of conversation with Renna and her dentist husband, Dr. G. W. Campbell, was his love of philosophy books. In fact, because Marilyn often ran late, she would book two adjacent appointments so that she would have enough time for their discussions (and her facial).

Scholar Oline Eaton wrote, "There is within Monroe's image, a deeply rooted assumption that she was an idiot. A vulnerable and kind and loving and terribly sweet idiot, but an idiot nonetheless." It is not unfair to say that these attitudes do in fact come largely from men who grossly underestimated Marilyn's intelligence, almost always because they were so distracted by her beauty. Luckily for Marilyn, she mostly ignored this, aiming much higher, and claiming with superb insight that "women who seek to be equal with men lack ambition."

*Are there any surprising omissions in
Marilyn's personal library?*



Insomuch as you can tell something about a person by what they choose to include in their personal library, you can equally tell a lot about someone by what they choose to exclude. We all have books, authors, even whole genres that are not to our taste, and that might be for any number of reasons. Reading is such a subjective activity, and we are not obliged to like everything. We may dislike the politics or beliefs of an author so we give their work a wide berth. And this is a difficult one to admit, but however hard we try, some books will just be beyond our understanding. There is a reason, for example, why my personal library contains no books about quantum physics.

In some ways, to ask about omissions in Marilyn's library is a misleading question since we must regard her personal library as incomplete. We know for certain she bought books that were not in her possession when she died. We don't know the reasons for this, but the most common explanations for books going missing are loaning them and not getting them returned, losing them, leaving them behind somewhere, giving them away, ruining them beyond redemption, destruction by dogs or children, or following Dorothy Parker's advice on bad books, "This is not a novel to be tossed aside lightly. It should be thrown with great force." But even bearing these caveats in mind, it is possible to identify certain types of books Marilyn seemed to avoid. Given that we know she was a wide reader and that she enjoyed contemporary fiction, what significant books of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s were missing from her library?

The first striking omission to consider is that as far as we know, Marilyn did not own books from the gothic genre. Authors who would have been popular during her time were Patricia Highsmith, Shirley Jackson, and Daphne du Maurier. (Though there are claims that in 1958 Marilyn was seen with a copy of Shirley Jackson's *Life Among the Savages* tucked under her arm—a humorous memoir of Jackson's parenting.) The lack of du Maurier is especially interesting because her best-known novel, *Rebecca*, was such a successful Hollywood film, made by David O. Selznick and directed by Alfred Hitchcock. If we include classic gothic fiction, Marilyn did not seem to own copies of *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë or *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. Again, both novels were turned into Hollywood classics, *Wuthering Heights* starring Laurence Olivier, whom Marilyn would eventually appear alongside in *The Prince and the Showgirl* (and become his employer since the film was made by her production company), and *Jane Eyre*, produced by and starring Orson Welles. Marilyn did not own copies of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, or *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James. No ghost stories, no Edith Wharton, no decaying portrait in the attic of Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, and given her love of European literature and poetry, no *Les Fleurs du Mal* by Charles Baudelaire.

Somehow it doesn't seem too much of a surprise that Marilyn avoided gothic literature. Maybe her life was gothic enough with her bleak childhood in an orphanage

and her mother in an asylum. But it does make one wonder whether she would have identified with the character in a story like “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, describing how society—in particular, men—tormented and turned women mad. There is no Charles Dickens in her library either, so once again, perhaps reading about grinding poverty and broken families was not something Marilyn wanted to do. But caution is required: It doesn’t mean that she didn’t. She is on record as saying she read a lot of Shakespeare and even memorized lines believing that one day she could play Juliet. Yet there were no Shakespeare plays in her library.

In many ways, how other people wrote about Marilyn makes her sound as though she was a prime candidate to be a reader of the gothic. Her apparent endless despair, her inability to accept comfort, and in some cases, even a death wish. Arthur Miller claimed he was helpless in the face of her anguish. He even describes a time in which Marilyn, surely out-Gothing Goths, lay in the freshly dug grave of her beloved aunt Ana, a family friend who raised her as a younger woman. Marilyn just wanted to see what it would feel like to lie in the ground.

Yet outside of this she did appear to have something that armed her against gothic sensibilities: hope. An article written in the days after Marilyn’s death and published in the *Los Angeles Times* was a defense of Marilyn’s bravery but a depiction of her that was not so far removed from a gothic heroine. The author of the article was surprising—Ayn Rand (also not present in Marilyn’s library). Rand boldly claimed that “if there was ever a victim of society, Marilyn Monroe was that victim.” Describing Monroe’s upbringing as Jane Eyre-ish, being both “sordid and horrifying,” Rand praises Marilyn for having gone through this and still be able to present a radiant benevolence, innocence, and joy. This took, Rand claimed, “a heroism of the highest order.” Making her way to the top, once she got there Marilyn discovered that not only was it as horrible as where she had come from, but that it was filled with jealousy and people who delighted in others’ misfortune. Rand argued that Marilyn was envied for her goodness, her beauty, her earnestness, and her joy. Like a classic gothic heroine, she did not stand a chance surrounded by such corruption. It was the evils of the current cultural moment. Rand ended her article with a brutal accusation: “Anyone who has ever felt resentment against the good for being the good, and given voice to it, is the murderer of Marilyn Monroe.”

Another genre missing from Marilyn’s personal library is science fiction. There is no Isaac Asimov, who was huge from the 1950s onward, and no Ray Bradbury. It feels as though a book like *Fahrenheit 451*, published in 1953, would have appealed to Marilyn given Bradbury wrote it as a response to the McCarthy-era witch hunts and his fury at what he saw as the interference and censorship carried out by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the life of creatives. Marilyn brushed up against all this during her relationship with Miller, even accompanying him to New York when he was summoned to appear before HUAC.

She had no books by Arthur C. Clarke or John Wyndham, with his postapocalyptic triffids. In 2013, American academics carried out research to see if there were any specific reasons for people to dislike science fiction. They were surprised to discover that many readers felt it was a genre they did not take seriously and that it did not have as much

academic standing as, for example, classic literature. The researchers gave readers two versions of a text. The first was a “literary” version, while the second changed words to alter the setting from contemporary America to a fantasy setting. This involved changing words like “door” to “airlock.” Immediately readers claimed they had less empathy and identification with the characters in the science fiction story, and they assumed because it was fantasy it was less intelligent. It would be pure speculation to apply this to Marilyn, but it is worth considering that much of Marilyn’s reading was her attempt to “better” herself. If she felt a genre was not going to help with that, or worse still, if she would become a joke for reading it, then it may go some way to explain why she avoided it (along with the fact that maybe she just didn’t like it).

Some significant texts from the 1950s were missing from Marilyn’s library, such as *The Hidden Persuaders* by Vance Packard, published in 1957, exploring techniques used by advertising companies to manipulate consumers. She did not own a copy of *The Kinsey Reports*, published in 1948 and 1953, exploring human sexuality. (Marilyn did have a book about male impotence in her library though.) Given its cultural impact and prominence, it is also surprising that Marilyn did not appear to own a copy of Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*, which had been translated and published by Doubleday in America in 1952. This book was so popular that it was turned into a play in 1955 and then a movie in 1959, which starred, among others, an old roommate of Marilyn’s, Shelley Winters.

One popular writer of the 1960s who did not appear in Marilyn’s library was Anthony Burgess. His name would have been known in America after the March 1962 publication of *A Clockwork Orange*, which caused some consternation with its extremely violent subject matter. American reviewers were less perturbed by this than British ones, and although it received widespread coverage it did not sell particularly well. This may offer one reason why Marilyn overlooked the book. (By the mid-1960s the novel had only sold 3,872 copies.) Had she lived she may have become more interested in later years, when certain states began banning the book. Sadly, Burgess did not have too many kind words for Marilyn when he wrote an essay about her, published posthumously in 1998 in his collection *One Man’s Chorus*. After discussing the role of blond hair, a perennial favorite with male writers, he decided that Marilyn was not beautiful; she had “mere prettiness” and a face with no classic lines. In fact, he concluded, Marilyn’s face “remains a slangy face, essentially plebian.” It’s always fascinating to read certain men, who are no oil paintings themselves, feeling confident enough to pass judgment on the physical beauty of Marilyn Monroe.

Another prominent author who was also missing from Marilyn’s collection is Allen Ginsberg (surprising given Marilyn did read at least one of the Beats). There was no J. D. Salinger either. *The Catcher in the Rye* had been published in novel form in 1951 and was regarded as containing a new, modern, colloquial voice in the character of Holden Caulfield and dealt with themes of angst, alienation, identity, and sex. Marilyn also had no confessional poets like Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. No William Golding or Gwendolyn Brooks, or Joseph Heller.

None of this is designed to knowledge-shame Marilyn—just the opposite, in fact.

People are entitled to read what they like, but it is fascinating to explore exactly what she did choose to read and what appeared to be missing. Some of this could be because of her education, which she felt had been lacking. In her own words, “No one ever told me what to read.” In this sense, given Marilyn was self-educated (she shared this with Anne Sexton), then the contents of her personal library become even more impressive. But it also tells us something about her preferences too, and if you have ever shelf-snooped in someone’s house, you know that what is absent and what is present is equally interesting.

One final point to consider, in the spirit of playfulness and daydreaming, are the books in the 1960s that Marilyn *just* missed, ones that might have played a part in her personal and professional life. *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan was published just six months after Marilyn’s death, establishing a platform for second-wave feminism. Marilyn had stated in an interview, “One of the best things that ever happened to me is that I’m a woman. That is the way all females should feel.” Added to this were the emerging voices of Joan Didion, Sylvia Plath, Anaïs Nin, Maya Angelou, and Jean Rhys.

We know that Marilyn read literature that was adapted for film. She had copies of books such as *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser, which was filmed as *A Place in the Sun*. (Marilyn admired Elizabeth Taylor’s performance.) She also owned *Mischief* by Charlotte Armstrong. (The movie *Don’t Bother to Knock* was based on this novel.) Her library contained a copy of *Born Yesterday* by Garson Kanin. (Marilyn auditioned for the movie, but Judy Holliday got the part.) She also owned a copy of *Let’s Make Love* by Matthew Andrews, a novelization of the film Marilyn had starred in with Yves Montand.

So, it’s not a stretch to consider the following. In 1963, Charles Webb published *The Graduate*, the story of Benjamin Braddock, who begins an affair with an older woman, Mrs. Robinson. This was famously made into a film in 1967 directed by Mike Nichols and starring Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft. Jeanne Moreau and Doris Day had been among the first choices to play the role of the seductive Mrs. Robinson. Yet given different circumstances, this seems a part that would have been perfect for Monroe.

In 1966 Jacqueline Susann’s *Valley of the Dolls* was published and made into a film the next year by Twentieth Century-Fox, one of Marilyn’s employers. Marilyn could have played any of the three main characters: Anne, who after various romantic entanglements remains happily single and independent; Neely, the beautiful film actor who moves to Hollywood, succumbs to alcohol, spends time in a sanatorium, and ends up destitute; or Jennifer, the beautiful chorus girl whose career does not go as planned and culminates in her making porn. Upon discovering she has breast cancer, Jennifer kills herself, believing that her body is the only currency she has to offer.

In a different world, maybe for Marilyn, all these books and roles could have happened as she tackled growing older in Hollywood, playing even more nuanced and serious parts. It really is not difficult to imagine Marilyn’s delivery of “Hello, Benjamin” to Dustin Hoffman. It wasn’t to be. But as Marilyn said, “Anything’s possible, almost.”

Did Marilyn read all her books?



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This is a question that is often asked by skeptics who, after being told about Marilyn's extensive personal library, respond with "Okay, but did she actually *read* her books?" It's quite an odd question to ask and it feels pointed. It carries certain implications: Was Marilyn capable of reading? Were her books just for show? Did she merely use her books to look intelligent while being the opposite? Would anyone have asked this question about Laurence Olivier or Alfred Hitchcock? When Arthur Miller met the playwright Clifford Odets, one of his first questions about Marilyn was "She *reads*, doesn't she?," with Miller observing that the question was asked as though Marilyn were a "prize gazelle or a genius chimp."

It is highly unlikely that Marilyn read all the books in her library from cover to cover. Who does? And since most people don't, why should Marilyn be held to different standards than anyone else? Reading does seem to come with all sorts of societal judgments, not just whether someone has read books, but what sort of books they have read. Certain books are held up as quite literally the holy grails of literature, while others are not regarded as "real" writing at all. Shame is attached to gaps in reading knowledge, and there are a lot of taboos and shoulds and shouldn'ts. This creates enormous space for impostor syndrome and guilt. Two things that should never be associated with the delight of reading.

Like most of us, Marilyn would have had a to-be-read pile, or books that she started and didn't bother finishing, or books she was gifted and didn't like. She will certainly have read books and then forgotten about them, which places them in an odd category. A forgotten book is different from an unread book, but it might as well be unread if it is forgotten. That said, Ralph Waldo Emerson had a different idea about this, claiming, "I cannot remember the books I've read any more than the meals I've eaten; even so, they have made me." This suggests even forgotten books are soaked up somehow and magically add something to our amnesiac brains.

I doubt too that Marilyn read the six foreign-language books in her library, two of which were in French and German, one in Spanish. Reference books, anthologies, encyclopedias, books about outdoor work, *Landscaping Your Own Home* by Alice Dunstan, and *Flower Arranging for Fun* by Hazel Peckinpugh Dunlop all seem like books that would be dipped into and out of, or skimmed, rather than read cover to cover.

And this raises another issue—the different ways of reading. It is possible to be engrossed in a book, to read and savor each word slowly and carefully. But it is just as possible to skim-read, even skip over a few pages (hello, *Ulysses*), or get a feel for the book by reading a few chapters, often called "sampling." Arthur Miller noted that Marilyn thought she could get the idea of a book from a few pages and "often did." But his other observations don't help Marilyn's reputation much. In his autobiography, *Timebends*, he wrote, "With the possible exception of Colette's *Cheri* and a few short stories I had not

known her to read anything all the way through.” Of course, it is possible in the times that he observed her reading this was true, but it is also a demonstrable fact that she read many books all the way through. As mentioned earlier, she had a deep understanding of the character of Grushenka by reading *The Brothers Karamazov*. Equally, after reading *A Lost Lady* by Willa Cather, Marilyn wanted her production company to film the novel. (In the end permission was denied and Cather withdrew film rights after a disappointing experience with an earlier adaptation.) And she was so taken with the work of the French existentialist Albert Camus that she had a picture of him on the wall in her New York apartment. It’s curious to be writing a book about the literary life of Marilyn Monroe and somehow having to justify that she actually *read* books.

The environment should also be taken into consideration. We know Marilyn liked to read in a number of different settings. The poet Norman Rosten recalled Marilyn telling him she had lazed in bed one Sunday morning reading his book of poems. But we also know that Marilyn read on film sets between takes. This was observed and commented on by many people, including the photographer Eve Arnold and the journalist W. J. Weatherby. Often, she would be late on set due to nervous sickness, or perfecting her hair and makeup (connected to the former), but there is at least one anecdote of a runner entering her trailer on *Some Like It Hot* to find her feet up, engrossed in a book. When told she was needed on set, she replied, “Fuck off,” as anyone who has ever been interrupted reading at a crucial moment will understand. W. J. Weatherby, who was present during the filming of *The Misfits*, recalled Marilyn’s entourage had all been reading Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet* and enthusiastically told her she must read it as a good example of a modern masterpiece. When she asked Weatherby what he thought of it and he replied it was too wordy for him, she grinned with relief, having found it a bit hard going herself.

Marilyn also fell into the dreaded habit many of us have acquired of reading more than one book at a time. In a 1961 letter to Dr. Greenson, Marilyn owned up to this. Writing from her hospital bed in Columbia University’s Presbyterian Medical Center, where she was convalescing after a distressing confinement in Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic, she describes passing the sleepless nights by reading. Her distress is evident: “Sometimes I wonder what the night time [*sic*] is for. It almost doesn’t exist for me—it all seems like one long, long horrible day.” To try to be constructive, she took to reading *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*, which made her cry, as she felt instinctively that he had died a disappointed man. But she confessed, “I haven’t gotten very far yet because at the same time I’m reading Seán O’Casey’s first autobiography,” which she found a little disturbing. This would be O’Casey’s *I Knock at the Door*, and Marilyn kept her copy. It was sold along with her other books at the Christie’s auction. Marilyn hints at the problems of dual reading, as switching between books often slows down progress. Though that is not necessarily a bad thing if the books bounce off each other well.

Another of her books sold at auction, *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* by F. Matthias Alexander, is now in private hands. The book offers “revolutionary” techniques (now known as the Alexander Technique) to help men and women develop their mental and physiological potentialities to the full. Marilyn was photographed reading this book in her

Beverly Carlton Hotel apartment. The current owner notes that there are numerous annotated passages in the first fifty-seven pages, one of which is “in both instances all depends on the point of view, we cannot be surprised that the mere promise to reform is usually futile, and we must furthermore realize that a changed point of view is the royal road to reformation.” One can only hope that has more clarity in context. At page fifty-seven, the owner found a bookmark from Pickwick Book Shop, and no other annotations beyond that point. It is quite a spectral find to think that Marilyn read so far, stopped, and marked her place, never to return to the book. The book was then packed away as it was and unearthed decades later, a little like leaving the room of a dead person untouched. There is an additional Pickwick’s bookmark on page ninety-five. This using-two-bookmarks could be Marilyn carelessly sliding a spare bookmark into the book if it was lying around on the table (a favorite habit of mine). It does seem reasonable to conclude though, given the interactive reading up to page fifty-seven, that she partially read the book and then stopped. So, she most likely did not read all the books in her library or all of *each* book in her library.

The completely unread books in Marilyn’s library play a vital role. The writer John M. Jennings has written about the joy of unread books, speculating that the mere physical presence of them creates a sort of ecstasy and comfort. Perhaps even more relevant for Marilyn, he also argues that for curious, lifelong learners, a collection of unread books is more valuable than read books because they act as reminder of all we do not know. He discusses the term “antilibrary,” which was popularized by another author, Nassim Taleb. Taleb opens his book *The Black Swan* exploring the writer Umberto Eco, whose personal library reached over thirty thousand books. He had so many, not because he had read them all, but because he desired to read them all, and more. This is what he means by an antilibrary. Eco believed that this waiting-to-be-discovered knowledge propels readers to carry on reading and learning because knowledge can never be complete, and we should never settle for thinking we know enough. In other words, a personal library shouldn’t act as some sort of ego-boosting (boasting?) tool but rather should be seen as enhancing and encouraging the process of learning.

Jennings even offers us another term for collecting unread books. It is a concept that combines two Japanese words: *tsunde-oku* (to let things pile up) and *dokusho* (to read books). This creates *tsundoku*—to buy books, pile them up, and not read them. As well as the sense of comfort this can offer, it also promises exciting knowledge and adventures waiting to be discovered. In Japanese *tsundoku* is not used as an insult, rather as more of an affectionate term nearer to the English “bookworm.”

Bearing this in mind, asking whether Marilyn read all her books takes us in a different direction. Rather than being an opportunity to be judgy and a little sneery, it redirects the purpose of reading and blasts away some of the taboos. Marilyn read lots of books, and lots of different *sorts* of books, but if some in her library did remain unread, then this is not an indication of her perceived ignorance, or her using books as props, but more a sign of her desire to continue learning. Eve Arnold, who photographed Marilyn on many occasions, noted that “her curiosity was a void to be filled, and she ingested information and experience.”

One final and more poignant idea to explore is that books, whether read or unread, are tangible, physical objects that stay with you. If you are surrounded by books, it is harder to feel bored or alone, or indeed lonely. For someone like Marilyn, who often felt alone and adrift in the world she had chosen (“Hollywood’s a place where they’ll pay you a thousand dollars for a kiss, and fifty cents for your soul”), familiar books can be like old friends, there to offer words of comfort or make us laugh. Unread books are those exciting potential friends, with all the promise of what they may bring to our lives one day.

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*Why are there so many photographs of
Marilyn reading?*



The simple answer to this question is the truest: There are so many photos of Marilyn reading because she was always reading. And she liked to be photographed reading. Some of the images are taken in her various homes, some are studio shots, some in bookstores, some on film sets or in hotels. Luckily for us Marilyn and her books are captured visually because one question she was never asked in published interviews was “What are you reading?” She was always asked about her love life, her beauty regimen, Hollywood, what she wore to bed, sometimes her career, but nobody interviewing her was particularly interested in her mind. This means that we have more visual evidence of Marilyn reading than any firsthand accounts of books she read.

But these visual accounts are complicated affairs. And as we will discover, there is nothing like a photograph of Marilyn reading a book to utterly enrage Men of the Internet™. Eve Arnold noticed that whenever Marilyn was photographed reading, people would regard it as some sort of joke: the dumb blonde pretending to read a book that she couldn’t possibly understand. Others thought the books were merely amusing props and that one photograph of Marilyn reading *How to Develop Your Thinking Ability* by Kenneth S. Keyes was poking fun at her lack of intelligence. It never occurred to such people that Marilyn was poking fun at *them* and that she was having the last laugh.

The art critic, writer, and painter John Berger discusses how photographs of Monroe are often constructed to appeal to male sexuality but in fact have nothing to do with Marilyn’s own. This is perhaps true of the work of male photographers, but we know there was something different occurring with female photographers where the gendered power play was not in place. Berger argues that men and women have different ways of looking (“the gaze”) and that this difference can be read into the meaning or message of photographs. Women often have the added dimension of watching themselves being looked at. Certainly, many images of Marilyn portray her reading, somewhat unrealistically in flimsy lingerie, and are almost always caricatures of the “sex goddess.”

In 1952, Philippe Halsman photographed Marilyn reading on the floor of her Hollywood apartment. There is a record sitting beside her. We cannot see what Marilyn is reading because she has it resting in her lap. On the shelves behind her, just visible, are various books from her personal library. Many are unclear, but those that stand out are *Death of a Salesman* and *Situation Normal* by Arthur Miller, and art books on Goya, Botticelli, and da Vinci. There’s a book by Albert Einstein, a copy of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*, John Steinbeck’s *Tortilla Flat*, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, and on the bookshelf just above is another Tolstoy, the title obscured by Marilyn’s shoulder. There’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, and *The Wisdom of the Sands* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Just this snapshot shelf-snooping suggests Marilyn did not shelve her books by author or genre, but had a more random, arbitrary approach. Einstein next to Goya, Arthur Miller next to

Dostoevsky. Monroe herself is wearing quite a complicated-looking confection of diaphanous lace and chiffon. She looks slightly awkward and uncomfortable, especially if you compare this to other photographs where she is slouching in slacks and a sweater reading in a large squishy chair. The irony here, given that we know Marilyn was a big reader, is that it is the books that are regarded as props, not the uncomfortable-looking lingerie that many women wouldn't dream of lounging around in to enjoy a good, long read. And when people joke about Marilyn pretending to fake-read for a photo, they are overlooking that the reading aspect of the image is the least fake part. Of course, every photograph is in one sense a construction because it is composed. And yes, photographs do use props because that helps tell a story. French philosopher Roland Barthes called them signifiers because they indicate a shortcut to certain knowledge (bookcase = intelligent / lingerie = sexuality). Marilyn knew more than most how this worked. In fact, after several shoots with Monroe, Eve Arnold declared, "Over the years I found myself in the privileged position of photographing someone who I had first thought had a gift for the still camera and who turned out to have a genius for it." Marilyn knew exactly what she was doing. In this sense, in many pictures of Monroe reading she is both exploited (male photographers projecting the expected image of her for male titillation) and exploiter (Monroe knew what sold and had absolute agency in the making of her image).

But one cannot also help but feel that Marilyn was well aware of the role time would play in her images. Known and admired primarily for her beauty, she understood that beyond the frame of a photograph, in the eyes of a culture that valued only youth, this beauty would be doomed to fade. Photographs, however, arrest time. For Roland Barthes, a person who has been photographed can never leave the image; "they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies." Marilyn will always be young, reading in her black turtleneck or elegantly choosing books in a store on Santa Monica Boulevard. But once a photograph has been taken, even a second later means looking at it becomes a historical act. We are already looking at the past, and in that sense for Barthes, "cameras, in short, [are] clocks for seeing." Marilyn understood that one day her fame may disappear or that she would get older, and so the poignancy of looking at photographs of a younger self takes on an air of melancholy. "I want to grow old without facelifts," she said. "I want to have the courage to be loyal to the face I've made. Sometimes I think it would be easier to avoid old age, to die young, but then you'd never complete your life, would you? You'd never wholly know you." To be photographed is to become a ghost.

This is why Marilyn understood the power of photography, one of the few things that can truly last after we are long gone. And this is why, when she finally gained a little autonomy over her career, *how* she was photographed became so important to her. She realized that so many people would always see her as the "blond bombshell," but that didn't mean she couldn't project herself as something else. In this case doing something she loved: reading.

One series of pictures that do just this were taken in 1955, and perhaps not surprisingly, shot by a woman. They show how Monroe and Eve Arnold worked together to produce something exceptional. The images of Marilyn in a children's playground in Mount Sinai, Long Island, reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* are possibly some of the most

discussed images of Monroe. There are newspaper articles, blogs, academic papers, and chapters in books (here's another one). And these images, when posted online, elicit an absolutely furious response from the Men of the Internet™. Even a cursory glance at comments when this photograph appears on Instagram shows there is something about it that really gets under the skin of some men.

The images were taken on the large grounds of the Chandler Estate, now demolished, a waterfront resort overlooking Mount Sinai Harbor. Arnold wanted to be somewhere well off the beaten track, where the photo shoot would not be disrupted by fans. (She had previously witnessed Marilyn getting mobbed on a nearby beach.) The first part of the shoot was taken with Marilyn among bullrushes and reeds in a leopard-print swimsuit. But after that was over and the sun was starting to turn to the golden hour, Arnold found a nearby abandoned children's playground with a multicolored climbing frame and a merry-go-round, paint peeling, rust evident. Marilyn, now changed and wearing a colorful striped tank top with black shorts, is sitting in the playground reading the final pages of *Ulysses*, a book she had been carrying around with her for some time. She had bought her copy from one of the bookshops in Lower Manhattan—there used to be forty-eight running from Union Square to Astor Place, known as Book Row. She had an American first edition published by Random House in January 1934 after the ruling that the book was not obscene (it had previously been banned). Arnold captured a series of pictures showing Marilyn reading the book. It is the final pages of *Ulysses* that seem to be catching Marilyn's attention. This is often regarded as the most erotic part of the book as the character of Molly Bloom engages in a long, sexually explicit soliloquy as she falls asleep in bed head to toe with her husband Leopold. Joyce described it as the most "obscene" part of the book. This stream-of-consciousness chapter covers Molly's feelings about her husband and her lovers, and describes some of her satisfying sexual encounters in graphic detail. All this takes place in approximately twenty-two thousand words but only eight sentences, with no punctuation. The final sentence alone is 4,391 words. So, a challenging read. Scholar Julie Sloan Brannon points out that in 1955 the "dirty" reputation of *Ulysses* would have been stronger than it is today as it was only twenty-two years after the ban had been lifted. Now it is more known for being an intellectual tome, but back then it would still have retained a whiff of scandal. As ever with images of Marilyn reading, questions were asked back in the 1950s and continue to be asked today. Was she really reading one of the most impenetrable books of the twentieth century? Was the photo staged? Was Arnold mocking Marilyn?

All kinds of issues were unearthed about snobbery connected to certain literary texts—if Marilyn wasn't the ideal reader, who was? There seemed in certain circles a real discomfort between two different worlds colliding: high art/literature and a beauty idol from Hollywood. Sloan Brannon points out that the image forces us to abandon elitist assumptions about what sort of people read "difficult" literature while bringing Monroe to the attention of a more literary crowd. Ultimately it challenges snobbery attached to highbrow reading.

There were some who felt Arnold was being mischievous with imagery, depicting the best-known "dumb blonde" reading the dirtiest book, thus reinforcing her sexuality. Eve

Arnold was not making a joke at Marilyn's expense. She did not regard Marilyn as "dumb"; in fact, they had respected and cared for each other. But what Arnold was doing was capturing Marilyn between official shots reading a book she kept in her car and had been dipping in and out of, whose flow and sound of the words she had been enjoying. In fact, Marilyn said she sometimes read it aloud to herself. She found it rather hard going but enjoyed how it sounded. Arnold's images disrupt all kinds of elitist assumptions, resulting in what media scholar Siobhan Lyons refers to as "the democratisation of literature." What Arnold did was capture Marilyn doing what Marilyn always did but that the world often didn't see and sometimes didn't want to see: Marilyn reading. Anthony Burgess claimed that since Marilyn's status as a beauty idol always took precedence over her mind, Arnold's images added depth to the Monroe mythology. Yes, the photos were staged in the sense that Arnold constructed and composed them (that's what makes them such powerful photographs), but it is quite a leap to move from this to accusations that Marilyn was fake-reading a book—and a book that she was able to talk about in some depth, not only content wise but how she was reading it too.

It would be nice to think that this point is obvious, but not everyone got on board with this back then and they still haven't. Skepticism about the Marilyn/*Ulysses* situation remains as strong today as it was seventy years ago. How do we know this? Because it is everywhere. Just so you don't have to, I have collected a series of comments left beneath this photograph when it has been posted online over the last couple of years. I won't name and shame with user handles. I couldn't find a horrible comment left by a woman, though I am sure they exist somewhere in the sprawl of online life. The following comments are all written by men in response to a post showing Arnold's image with a caption saying, "Marilyn Monroe reading *Ulysses*." I have transcribed the comments faithfully with spelling and punctuation errors. From time to time, I have added an aside after the comment for clarification purposes.

She's not reading.

"holding" James Joyce's ULYSSES [*sic*]

Was she able to read? Or was she intelligent but just a drugged up whore? [This user returned the next day to add another comment: "The first woman who just acted like a slag to get famous."]

Anybody can turn to the rear fly leaf and pretend to be reading. Yeats gave up after 70 pages.

Yeah, totally believe that she read it.

model concentrates on balance whilst holding paper product.

Don't understand why anyone gives a crap about Marilyn Monroe. She was a pretty lady. She screwed a bunch of famous guys, which does not make her special

in anyway [*sic*]. She never said anything profound or particularly intelligent. She's just a piece of ass. I don't even think me saying that is an insult. She never presented herself as anything else. [Presumably he's overlooking arguing himself into a corner here given Marilyn is presenting herself reading one of the most notoriously challenging books of the twentieth century.]

obviously just posing with the book. Nobody finishes a book like *Ulysses* sitting on playground equipment.

I always got Marilyn and Anne Nichole smith [*sic*] mixed up.. Sluts.

Dang. She was pretty.

Presumably, it was an act

She could've lost some weight...

Monroe was smarter than the bimbo image, but I doubt if her intelligence revolved around books.

Uh, I think not.

Notice she's "reading" the empty book board (if you can tear yr eyes away from her legs). What an empty idol.

also the see-saw is being propped up by someone else. Nobody finishes a book like that. This is staged as fuck. [Staged as fuck or not, it didn't happen on a seesaw.]

what lips

Nothing more sexy than a good looking woman reading a book. a powerful combination. [Nothing less sexy than misogyny.]

And I'm sure she knew about nine of the words

Joyce is a tough read for anyone. But Marilyn? Shaking my head.

one for the wank bank [Urgh.]

I didn't know she could read...

She promptly blew the photographer 30 seconds after this photo was taken. [Please note the anatomical impossibility of this claim.]

We can divide these comments into certain thematic strains. First, there is the general doubt and disbelief strain—they simply do not believe that Marilyn read *Ulysses*; she is

merely pretending or just “holding” it. Which links to the next theme of those who claim the photograph is staged (“as fuck”), and presumably they think it is staged because they don’t regard Marilyn as capable of reading *Ulysses*. I mean even Yeats (clever, poet, man) gave up after seventy pages, so what chance does Marilyn have? The next theme is objectifying Marilyn, so the comments focus on her physical attractiveness and have nothing whatsoever to do with the book. Then there are the knowledge-shaming comments. Marilyn would only know nine words in the book, another man shaking his head (presumably in disbelief and despair) that anyone would believe Marilyn tackled *Ulysses*. Finally, we have the sexually inspired comments: Marilyn is a slut/slag, good-looking women reading are sexy, we have a fantasy about Marilyn performing a sex act on the photographer, and one generous man sharing with us how he collects and stores his masturbatory material.

This level of misogyny is abhorrent, but it does give real insight into what Marilyn must have faced all her life. It also highlights in horrifying detail what she meant in her final interview when she said that some people see celebrities as somehow less than human. “They feel fame gives them some kind of privilege to walk up to you and say anything to you, you know, of any kind of nature and it won’t hurt your feelings.”

Yet art historian Griselda Pollock, who wrote a wonderful paper analyzing the Arnold-Monroe images, suggests that in the face of all this misogyny, Marilyn was sending a strong message in those *Ulysses* photos. For a start, Pollock argues, it is no coincidence that Marilyn is reading the final pages of the book, the only part of the book that adopts a woman’s perspective of the world (albeit written by a man). Furthermore, Pollock believed that far from being a fake read, not only did Marilyn know the book but she was in fact inviting the “knowing reader to remember the text sufficiently to engage with what it was in that section that might be pertinent to a woman reader, someone involved in performance, in competition and in the public and private knowledge about her sexual persona and history.” In other words, if anything was staged (and it was), the underlying message wasn’t “Look at this intellectually challenged woman reading a book that is beyond her.” Rather, Marilyn was making a profound statement about her social positioning, with a sly nod toward the sort of men who would spend their time leaving horrible comments about her in a public forum. More importantly, Pollock reinstates agency to Marilyn, who was known to actively work with Arnold on how her photographs should look.

My final thought on this matter is to wonder how many of the men leaving comments have actually read *Ulysses* themselves.

Marilyn was not always photographed reading weighty literature. As we know, she read widely, and images of her reflect this. This is by no means a complete list, but some of the reading material captured in photographs with Marilyn includes poetry (*Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman) and short stories (*Look Who’s Abroad Now* [1953] by Earl Wilson, a collection of stories based on the author’s travels). A chapter in the latter is about Marilyn, called “America’s *Greatest Scenic Wonder*,” the gag being the scenic wonder is Marilyn herself. It also includes the few occasions when the author met Marilyn, with Wilson complaining that she kept him waiting for an hour. Cue another

gag:

“What’s she doing in there?” I asked...

“We hear she just stands in there looking at her body. Can’t say I blame her...”

“Don’t they call that a Narcissus complex or something?” I said.

“I’d call it nice work if you can get it,” the guy answered.

In one of the photographs taken during this shoot, Marilyn is sitting in an armchair with her legs slung over the arm. She is wearing the black beaded dress she wore to sing to the troops in Korea and is laughing at something toward the end of Wilson’s book. Given this book is 272 pages long and Marilyn’s chapter starts on page 218, the joke of this photograph may be that she is reading about herself. With her shoes casually dangling off the ends of her toes and a wide grin, she doesn’t look remotely bothered by what is being said.

She was also photographed with *Death of a Salesman*, *The Poetry and Prose of Henrich Heine*, *Motion Picture Daily*, *To the Actor* by Michael Chekhov, who was her acting teacher, *Goya*, *Films in Review*, *The Los Angeles Examiner* (with a picture of Marilyn on the front page), Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, *War and Peace*, and now with Photoshop and the looming age of AI, anyone who writes a book and wants to sell it can do so using Marilyn’s image.

There is no doubt, as Susan Sontag wrote, that photography is an elegiac art. We are lucky to have so many images of Marilyn reading or pictured near her books because it helps us recast her as a serious and engaged reader. More poignantly, from photograph to photograph taken in different apartments and hotel suites, you can see in the background the same books on different shelves, in different rooms. Further proof that Marilyn packed and unpacked these treasured possessions as she moved from place to place. Everything in her life may have often been in flux, but her books were always there, solid and unmoving companions.

Did Marilyn's reading link to her acting?



Actors are storytellers. And the main tool for telling these stories are words—words that are spoken or translated into a performance. Words are used to create screenplays, novels, and stage plays. If you look at any website offering coaching for actors, they all stress the importance of reading. This link between reading and acting is worth exploring in detail because it can explain so many of the choices on Marilyn's bookshelves.

Some of the practical benefits of reading for an actor are that it improves memory, a skill that is essential for a profession that involves learning lines, sometimes at short notice. In relation to Marilyn, this brings to mind her experience on *The Misfits* when Arthur Miller would engage in last-minute rewrites, sometimes changing the dialogue the night before a scene was due to be filmed, putting actors under pressure to learn a new script. Reading also helps concentration, which is essential for long days on set and staying focused during multiple takes. Sometimes multiple takes can occur because actors can't remember their lines, a claim director Billy Wilder made about Marilyn during the shooting of *Some Like It Hot*. And reading improves vocabulary, which is always useful for the spoken word or improvisation. But reading can also offer so much more than that, which is why *what* an actor reads is significant.

There seem to be four main categories that are regarded as most useful for an actor to spend their time reading. Marilyn read widely in all four. The first is books that deal with acting techniques. This is important because not only can an actor engage in continuous learning about their trade but they can also revise old techniques, learn new ones, and generally keep up-to-date. Aside from this, they can explore vocal coaching, physical movement, breathing, singing, dancing, and line delivery. The second category is (auto)biography, reading about the lives and careers of other actors or people in the industry. These books offer actors an inside view of career journeys, choices made, mistakes made, a glimpse behind the scenes, and often a reflection on the skills needed to make it as an actor. Perhaps most importantly, this category offers a way to humanize actors, to show their struggles and triumphs, failed relationships, hardships, addictions and recovery, or even in some cases the corrosive nature of fame and how they dealt (or failed to deal) with it. The third category is film scripts. Actors must read them anyway, but engaging with a range of scripts can offer an insight into the profession and encourage skills such as imagination and interpretation. This is why so many scripts that belong to actors tend to be heavily annotated as they scribble their insights and thoughts right onto the page. The final category is stage plays. In many ways, this is one of the most important categories for actors to be able to encounter key elements of acting, including understanding how language and dialogue work, appreciating story structure and plot, and grasping character arcs and motivations. Plays, in particular, help actors understand different perspectives, which in turn encourages critical thinking and new possibilities for performance. Any insight of this nature can help give roles depth or authenticity,

particularly if the characters being played are outside the actor's personal experience. Marilyn's approach to her profession is clearly reflected in her personal library, which shows evidence that she read extensively in all four of these categories, especially stage plays.

If we take each category one by one we can see that the acting techniques and perspectives Marilyn used, and which changed over time, were evident in her chosen reading material. At the beginning of her acting career, when she was first signed by Twentieth Century-Fox in 1946, they sent her to the Actors' Lab in West Hollywood on North Laurel Avenue, just off Sunset Boulevard behind the famous Schwab's Pharmacy and later Googie's Coffee Shop. The Actors' Lab had been founded in 1941 by a group of eight actors and was operated by Roman Bohnen, J. Edward Bromberg, and Morris Carnovsky. The aim was to transport the principles of acting that had been established by New York's Group Theatre to the West Coast, and like Chateau Marmont just across the road, it was open to all actors across a diverse social group. (The gossip columnist Hedda Hopper criticized the group for its opposition to racial segregation.) Based on the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavski, a Russian theater director and actor, the Group developed an acting technique that would eventually become known as "the Method." This involved elevating the experiential over the art of representation. In other words, instead of asking actors to "pretend," they were encouraged to draw on their past experiences and inner feelings in order to authentically portray the emotions that their character was going through. So, *feeling* the part rather than merely acting it. Stanislavski, who had directed productions by Chekhov and Ibsen, among others, found that the psychological realism in those plays was complemented by actors employing a deep level of self-analysis and reflection. He liked cast members to engage in a prolonged discussion of the text and a detailed analysis of the play before rehearsals began. Then he encouraged actors to search for inner motives to truly understand why the characters might do what they do, and by drawing on their conscious thoughts (which might also spark some unconscious processes), "the art of experiencing" would inform an actor's performance.

Despite this focus on the self, Stanislavski didn't have much interest in actors' biographies, calling them "tedious" and claiming that actors should be banned from talking about themselves. Naturally, he didn't apply this rule to himself and in 1924 published the first of his books about his life in the theater, called *My Life in Art*. In 1936 he published a semiautobiographical book (the first of three, so he clearly didn't find his own story tedious) called *An Actor Prepares*. A copy of this could be found in Marilyn's personal library and had been suggested to her by one of her early advocates, talent agent Johnny Hyde. According to him she read it like a textbook. The story is about a fictional young actor called Kostya, who during his first year of training is taught by a fictional director named Tortsov. The book is presented as a series of diary entries as Kostya recounts all the ways in which he is being trained in acting skills such as concentration, relaxation, movement, breathing, emotions, inner motives, and the final, dramatically exciting-sounding chapter "On the Threshold of the Subconscious." Marilyn enjoyed discussing any book Hyde suggested to her, and he felt this one would be especially meaningful, helpful even, given everything she had gone through in life. All her

experiences could be drawn on and mined to add depth to her acting.

This was not the only book relating to Stanislavski in Marilyn's library though. She also owned a copy of *Stanislavsky Directs* (1954) by Nikolai M. Gorchakov, which describes five productions Stanislavski directed, recording his instructions and advice and offering an analysis of why the productions were successful, or not. The plays discussed are as diverse as Charles Dickens's *The Battle of Life* and Mikhail A. Bulgakov's *Molière*, and the book ends with a reflection on the genius of Stanislavski, noting that "as a director-ideologist, he always maintained that the most important thing is for the director and actors to understand the meaning of the play: what is its purpose and what is the idea behind it." Stanislavski was insistent that actors and directors should discover the central social, ideological, and philosophical problem at the heart of the play. Without this insight and self-reflection, there could be no creativity. The actor must look within to transform into the character they are playing. Most of all, acting skill should be subjected to the precept of Schepkin, the father of realism in the Russian theater: "Be guided by life." In words that surely must have resonated with Marilyn, Stanislavski spoke particularly to those at the beginning of their careers, urging them into a mindset of solidarity and to view acting as a collective art. "Any mistake or unkind word or gossip dropped into the collective poisons all, including the one who injected this poison." Talent, he concluded, can only grow in an atmosphere of love, friendship, just criticism, and self-criticism.

This is the approach to acting Marilyn would have encountered in the Actors' Lab and one that clearly appealed to her, as even after Fox canceled her first contract, she continued her lessons there, paying the fees through modeling jobs and with a certain amount of financial leeway and goodwill from her teachers. As with the Group in New York, the Actors' Lab was left of center politically, and in the early 1950s when McCarthyism was in full swing, Morris Carnovsky and his wife Phoebe Brand were labeled communists by HUAC, leading to the loss of much financial support for the group.

During this time, we get a further glimpse of how Marilyn used to read to help her cope with the challenges of Hollywood. In September 1946, Marilyn moved into room 307 in the Hollywood Studio Club, a safe, affordable, and chaperoned residence for young women struggling to make it in the film industry. It had been established in 1916 by Eleanor Jones, a librarian at the Hollywood Public Library. She noticed groups of young women meeting in the basement to read plays and discuss their careers and was concerned to discover they were all living in cheap hotels and boardinghouses. Raising funds from the film studios and local businesses, Jones managed to get enough money together to open the Hollywood Studio Club, at first in a small house on Carlos Avenue. After a successful campaign to find a larger premises and with the support of people like Howard Hughes, Gloria Swanson, and silent-film star Norma Talmadge, Jones employed one of the few women architects in Hollywood to design the new building. Julia Morgan had designed, among other illustrious buildings, the Hearst Castle in San Simeon. However, when Marilyn took her room, shared with another young actor named Clarice Evans, she was not concerned about design or the size of her closet; she was most

concerned about bookshelf space. Evans noted, “Later in the afternoon she arrived at my doorway laden with enough books to start a circulating library.” We see as early as this how Marilyn’s reading habit was crucial to her day-to-day life. Evans noted that Marilyn would sit under her portable (in fact enormous, with a terrifying number of electrical wires) hair dryer reading classics such as the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, translated by Edward FitzGerald. If she got rejections or disappointing news, she would read the Bible and then spend the next day “systematically storming the gates of every other studio in Hollywood.” When she was offered a film contract one of her first moves was to open an account with Marian Hunter’s Book Shop at 352 North Camden Drive in Beverly Hills.

In 1948 Marilyn was assigned a drama coach named Natasha Lytess, who would stay involved with Marilyn until 1956. Lytess, who was Jewish, had been born in Berlin or Russia or Austria, depending on who you believe, in 1911 (also a fact that is open for discussion) and luckily escaped Germany when the Nazis came to power. Despite her hopes for an acting career, her accent and apparently her “severe” appearance worked against her, so coaching seemed the next best thing. There is much speculation about the nature of the relationship between Marilyn and Lytess, but the relevant part here is that she urged Marilyn to read widely, particularly Russian literature. Drawing on some, but not all, of the principles of Stanislavski, she encouraged Marilyn to look inward and think about her own experiences and how they could be used for acting. This did not always end well, and looking back at it now, appears to not only have been reckless but positively damaging for Marilyn. This surely reached its nadir when, so one version of the story goes, Lytess encouraged her to drive and meet her previously unknown biological father to explore feelings of abandonment, only for him to refuse to see her, leaving Marilyn walking back to the car in tears.

While Marilyn was still working with Lytess she also engaged another acting coach, Michael Chekhov, at the suggestion of (once again depending on who you believe) Jack Palance or Elia Kazan. Chekhov was the nephew of one of Marilyn’s favorite Russian writers, Anton Chekhov, and had been a student of Stanislavski, but not just any student. Stanislavski described him as his most brilliant student. Having followed the principles of the Method, one key feature being “affective memory,” which uses emotional memories to inform a performance, Chekhov suffered a nervous breakdown. Stanislavski wondered if there might be some “limitations” to using emotional memories in his method. Chekhov did see the value in this but added a slight variation. As well as drawing on inner feelings and past experiences, he also taught the importance of physical movements, including molding, floating, and flying. These movement dynamics, along with psychological analysis, would help an actor find the physical core of a character. This emphasis on physical movement is apparent if we think about a Monroe performance in a film such as *Some Like It Hot*.

Although Chekhov’s ideas were developed for stage actors, he did reluctantly realize that this technique would allow film actors to get the most out of their performances, though he disliked the commercialism of Hollywood, which he felt favored mass entertainment over artistic creativity. Nevertheless, he coached several Hollywood greats, including Dorothy Dandridge, Clint Eastwood, and Patricia Neal, and wrote an

influential book called *To the Actor*, still used today by actors such as Anthony Hopkins. Published in 1942, Marilyn owned a copy and was photographed reading it in March 1955 by Ed Feingersh at the Ambassador Hotel in New York City. Sitting in an armchair with her legs hooked over the side and wearing stripy trousers, one arm behind her head and the book cradled in her left arm, Marilyn looks engrossed. It feels like a candid shot. In an unpublished memoir, Marilyn refers to Michael Chekhov as “the most brilliant man I have ever known,” crediting him with allowing her to see herself and her talent with new eyes. From Chekhov’s point of view, he soon realized in his twice-weekly lessons with Marilyn that he was dealing with an actor who had real emotional depth. They acted together in class, Chekhov as King Lear and Marilyn as Cordelia, and her portrayal made him angry that Hollywood was wasting such talent.

Marilyn’s next acting coach gives us even more insight into what she was reading and how this impacted her work. Lee Strasberg, regarded as the father of method acting in America, and his wife Paula became irreplaceable to Marilyn after she moved to New York in 1955. Her aim was to study her craft more seriously and to break away from the restrictive roles Fox insisted on offering her since signing a long-term contract with them in May 1951. The Strasbergs taught their version of the Method and were big advocates of “sense memory,” using sensory recall from past experiences to bring emotional depth and psychological realism to a role. Self-examination, they believed, was essential for an actor to really grasp their profession. It wasn’t enough though to feel the role, an actor needed to *become* the character, requiring a total involvement of self and a complete understanding of the character’s motivations.

Marilyn attended workshops at the Actors Studio and took private lessons with Lee Strasberg in his apartment, where she explored movement, breathing, vocals, delivery, and relaxation. The latter skill was something Strasberg found to be essential for all good actors, but given that he tended to yell at anyone who didn’t do as he instructed, it equally seems a skill that perhaps eluded him. One of the key elements of the relationship between the Strasbergs and Marilyn is that they took her seriously. During her private lessons she read and worked on monologues such as Molly Bloom’s soliloquy from *Ulysses*, a speech by Holly Golightly in Capote’s *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, excerpts from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and sections from Clifford Odets’s play *Golden Boy*. Marilyn certainly valued being treated as an intelligent and gifted actor and enjoyed all the benefits her life in New York offered: “For the first time I felt accepted, not as a freak but as myself.”

But others who saw the Strasberg method applied were less bothered by the ethical boundaries it seemed to cross than how it exposed vulnerable actors to previous trauma. Film editor Michael Kahn noted that “you had to go to the darkest places of yourself to act with Strasberg,” while set designer Boris Aronson told Marilyn, “Why are you doing this with him? Stop with this poison you are putting into yourself.” Yet Marilyn placed great faith and trust in the Strasbergs, and toward the end of her life even had plans to engage Lee to be her private Shakespeare coach for a full year, willing to pay him whatever he wanted. After a year’s training with him, she claimed Laurence Olivier had offered to help her polish up her delivery, and that she planned to act in all Shakespeare’s plays,

filming some, and presenting it as the Marilyn Monroe Shakespeare Festival. She wanted to star as Lady Macbeth, with Marlon Brando in the lead, using her own production company to produce the film. These anecdotes, whether true or not, do at least allow us to see that Marilyn's personal library extended well beyond the four hundred-plus books we know about.

There are quirrier books that Marilyn read to help with her acting. She owned a copy of *De humani corporis fabrica*, written by the sixteenth-century scholar Andreas Vesalius, which was an in-depth study of the human anatomy. Marilyn annotated pages and knew much about bone structure and how the body worked, which may explain why she was so knowledgeable when it came to composing herself in photographs.

She also owned *The Thinking Body* by Mabel Elsworth Todd, which explores physiology and the psychology of movement. Actor Ellen Burstyn described how Marilyn used this book not only to create her on-screen persona but to perfect her way of talking and her unique way of walking too: "This is the book that she created herself out of." The book contains an exercise to walk as though there is a length of string coming from the top of your head that is attached to a cloud. You then walk as though you are hanging from this cloud, which helps your body to undulate in all sorts of ways. Burstyn draws attention to the scene in *Niagara* (1953) where Marilyn is walking away from the camera with "her derriere doing the most miraculous, sexual things." This is certainly one explanation, but as ever with Marilyn there are others. Some claim her walk was because she shaved down one of the heels of her shoes. Another is that Marilyn said she just naturally walked like that. Either way, Monroe clearly had an interest in the physiology of the body, not just how it worked but also how it moved, which is essential for any actor to understand. Marilyn's copy of *The Thinking Body* was not sold in the Christie's auction, perhaps because Burstyn owns it. (In a documentary we see her flicking through the pages, and she describes it as "Marilyn's book.")

Marilyn loved reading (auto)biographies, some of classic, historical figures, others by people in the film industry. A notable book in her library was *Goodness Had Nothing to Do with It* (1959) by Mae West. This autobiography tracked West's "respectable" childhood in Brooklyn and covered her vaudeville career, her time onstage, through to her Hollywood stardom. With chapter titles such as "I Take the Spotlight," "I Get a Few Men Made," "SEX, More Sex, and the Cooler," and "A Real Star Never Stops," it is a fun romp through West's adventures. She offers advice such as all women should have a small, private world of their own, hats are essential, sleep is important "but don't overdo it," eating solid foods when you are nervous is "sheer disaster," and keeping healthy and supple is important, with special attention paid to breasts: "I regularly massaged mine with cocoa butter every night, and sometimes in the morning too." Her advice also stretched to men, sex, and romance ("The man I don't like doesn't exist"), and she ponders her favorite lovers and their bedroom skills, concluding that "on a one-lane highway every car has to judge its own speed, or it won't get there. And getting there is what's important." Marilyn was in the unusual position of reading West's autobiography having been on the receiving end of her sharp tongue. In one interview West accused Marilyn of impersonating her, claiming one would only like Monroe "if you like carbon

copies.” When asked by a reporter if she had any advice for Monroe, West offered, “My advice for her? Forget about the men; win over the ladies. The men won’t forget you anyway—not the way you walk.” But West also recognized Marilyn’s intelligence and standout qualities. Regarding herself as the original blonde, West still thought of herself as “Queen of the Roost.” In later life she reflected, “The only gal who came near me was pretty little Marilyn Monroe. But the rest of the gals? Big chests, small voices, and no brains.”

Another life story Marilyn read was that of the Italian actor Eleanora Duse (1858–1924). Often known simply as “Duse,” her biography by William Weaver, a copy of which was on Marilyn’s bookshelf, tells of Duse’s rise from a childhood of poverty to being regarded as “the greatest actress of her time.” Unlike many of the methods Marilyn studied, Duse claimed to have no particular technique other than attempting to eliminate the self and become the character she was portraying. She mostly declined to wear makeup, instead allowing the emotions, such as grief and joy, of her roles to “use” her body. By all accounts, and as one would imagine, this was a strain, and she was often ill. In Weaver’s cradle-to-grave book, some of the descriptions of Duse could well be written about Marilyn: “Duse’s spell was not confined to the stage, to the actress. The private Duse could be equally compelling.” Marilyn clearly thought so too; in a few photographs taken in her Beverly Carlton Hotel studio apartment, a framed photograph of Duse is visible on her dresser.

Marilyn also read autobiographies of her contemporaries. She owned a copy of *Act One* by Moss Hart, a playwright, librettist, and theater director. His book recounts his childhood with English-born Jewish immigrant parents in New York and his struggles to become a Broadway success. Marilyn certainly seemed to favor books about those in the industry who faced challenges before getting where they ended up. Perhaps she felt a certain level of identification.

But she also favored books about big, important historical men, books about triumph and greatness: *Napoleon* by Emil Ludwig, *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti* by John Addington Symonds, *Out of My Later Years* by Albert Einstein (one of Marilyn’s crushes), and the six-volume biography of Abraham Lincoln by her poet-friend Carl Sandburg.

Not surprisingly, Marilyn read many film scripts. The link between these and acting is obvious. Marilyn’s scripts are fascinating historical documents in themselves, highly annotated with notes, observations, and instructions that show her employing “the Method” as she tries to understand the inner feelings and motivations of her characters. One (*The Misfits*) even has a note from a writer attached to the front that reads, “*For Marilyn Monroe / —a credit to the / human race / mankind in general / and womankind in particular / Brendan Behan.*” The most overwhelming aspect of seeing these scripts is the knowledge that what appeared effortless on-screen was in fact the complete opposite. It only appeared effortless because Marilyn worked so hard to make it look so. In the Christie’s auction her scripts for *The Misfits*, *Some Like It Hot*, *Bus Stop*, *Let’s Make Love*, and *Something’s Got to Give* were sold. Sadly, her scripts for *The Asphalt Jungle*, *All About Eve*, *Niagara*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and *The Seven Year Itch* do not survive.

In the five scripts we do have though, it is possible to see how Marilyn drew on her own lived experiences to feed into her roles, as well as creating almost an off-screen life for her characters to explain why they behave as they do. In the margin of her script for *The Misfits*, Marilyn has written “personalization,” which given this film was written for her by her then-husband Arthur Miller possibly felt a little close to home anyway. Marilyn always had Paula Strasberg with her on set, so her coaching would have encouraged this idea of making the personal part of her craft. When Roslyn, her character in the film, has to show a sense of despair, Marilyn has written in her promptbook to accompany her script, “Stand on a spot of earth and call to the moon.” Or in a happier moment her notes say, “Think of something personal or person (something I like).” Her notes even instruct her on movement in certain scenes, such as “stretch like a cat... follow him like a kitten.” On more than one script she instructs herself to “be brave.” Often in red crayon she circles the name of her character in the script to make it stand out.

Sometimes her self-instructions are more general—on her script for *Some Like It Hot* during the scene on the yacht she has written, “All I have to do is play that moment.” Some scripts have written instructions about name pronunciation, spelling them out phonetically—in *Bus Stop* she writes, “Bo’s real name ‘Bo-re-guard.’” Some show Marilyn identifying with her character, as in *Let’s Make Love*: when Amanda describes how it feels to be an actress, Marilyn has written in the margin in an orangey-red crayon “(how well I know)” and “how true.”

A significant difference occurs with the script for *Something’s Got to Give*, the unfinished film from 1962. Here Marilyn is not just instructing herself, but as an older and more experienced actor she critiques the script, the writing, and the direction. She asks questions and offers some brutal observations. On the first page of a screenplay dated November 22, 1961, she asks in pencil, “Why was the writer who wrote it let go,” and referring to herself in the third person, “not a story for MM.” She questions “New producer How come?” and notes that a scene on page 127 is “not funny.” Unusually for Marilyn, she does slip into unpleasant language, noting that “at one point in the story two women like each other but hate the man—all the fags are going to love it.” There is no evidence whatsoever that Marilyn was homophobic, in fact just the opposite, so her choice of language here is curious. The word *fag* or *faggot* had been used as a slur since the early 1920s in America and was reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ movement in the 1970s. Professor Randall Kennedy of Harvard University, who specializes in race relations and hate language, suggests that context is all, as well as the beliefs of the person speaking. He argues that a word like *fag* can be used “viciously or facetiously or ironically or tenderly.” Given Marilyn’s own fluid sexuality and her numerous friendships with gay men, it seems unlikely that she used the word as hate speech, however uncomfortably it reads to us now. It is much more likely that it was used as slang within her friendship groups.

Throughout this script, Marilyn suggests rewrites, offers ideas for direction and action, and notes her opinion on what will and will not work for her character—commenting in large letters “NO NO NO” about the proposed final shot, which was to be a kissing scene. Three months later, in a revised script dated February 12, 1962, Marilyn’s interaction with the dialogue is even more intense, and she begins to bring some of her

reading knowledge and psychoanalysis into her exploration, suggesting that the character of Ellen is likely frigid: “We all know what Kinsey found out about most females.” Using ink and pencil, Monroe’s annotations are heavy across twelve pages, commenting on characters and their motivations, querying the use of language, suggesting ways in which the children could play (boxing, in a sand pit, on a swing). These scripts show the moment when Marilyn’s reading about her craft and then the execution of that craft perfectly merge as she draws on her knowledge of acting theory, psychology, and her increasing understanding of how dialogue works.

This final point links to the fourth category of reading Marilyn used to support her acting—plays. The main purpose of reading plays for an actor is to understand speech, cadence, conversations, and how characters interact with each other. Marilyn had so many plays in her personal library by Seán O’Casey, Eugene O’Neill, Terence Rattigan, Tennessee Williams, and Henry James. One of her favorite playwrights appeared to be Clifford Odets, whom she met on a few occasions and whose play *Golden Boy* she used in her private acting lessons with Lee Strasberg. Her copy is inscribed with “MM” on the upper part of the cover, and inside the front cover in pencil is “Phil Roth—PL 10757,” the name and number of the actor with whom she performed the scene. The play is about the downfall of a young man named Joe Bonaparte, a gifted classical violinist who gives it up in favor of the fame and money that boxing can offer him. Working as a prizefighter for manager Tom Moody and promoter Roxy Gottlieb, Joe encounters Moody’s girlfriend Lorna and falls in love with her. Marilyn played Lorna. The play explored the tension between spiritual ideals and the lust for fame and money, and without giving away any spoilers, it has a suitably tragic ending. The original Broadway production opened in November 1937 at the Belasco Theatre and starred Frances Farmer as Lorna, an actor who shared many characteristics with Marilyn.

Monroe’s annotations are intense, again reminding herself to use “anything about my life /... my struggles.” She also notes, “I feel full of crap” and “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Exploring Lorna’s motivations and relationship to Joe she notes, “My need for / Joe—since my physical / aliveness depends on / him—Yet he is what / I’m not secure / with...” When Monroe and Roth eventually performed the scene for class in the Actors Studio, their fellow students were blown away by how much Monroe gave to the role, holding nothing back. Afterward, Strasberg turned to the class and asked, “Well, was the scene excellent or not?” Odets almost certainly knew that Marilyn had acted scenes from his play, and for Christmas 1960 he sent her a copy of Gordon Young’s novel *The Cat with Two Faces*, inscribed “Dear M.M, Xmas greetings and light reading, / Affectionately / Clifford Odets / 12.60.” (If reading about the moral ambiguities of a spy taking on the Nazis could be regarded as light reading.)

The final point to consider is that in 1955 Marilyn formed her own production company, Marilyn Monroe Productions (MMP), along with her friend, photographer, and film producer Milton H. Greene. It was unusual for a Hollywood actor to do this at the time, especially a woman. It meant that as well as gaining some autonomy over her career away from the studios, Marilyn had to read books and plays to explore potential film projects. We already know that she wanted to film *Macbeth* with Marlon Brando in

the lead role. And we know that she was refused permission to film Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*. In 1957, the first major production by Marilyn's company would be a film adaptation of *The Sleeping Prince*, a play by Terence Rattigan that would eventually become *The Prince and the Showgirl* starring Marilyn and Laurence Olivier.

There is no doubt that Marilyn was dead serious about learning the art of acting, and a major way for her to achieve that was to read her way into deep knowledge of the craft. Her level of work and skill is often underestimated, mainly because having been typecast by the studios, it seemed Marilyn was simply playing the same role but in different plots. While there is some truth to this, because Marilyn herself felt constrained and wasted by the way her career was heading in the 1950s, it does her a disservice in terms of how well she embodied those roles. And it is worth thinking about what those characters would have looked like played by an actor without Marilyn's skill and nuance. Reading allowed Marilyn to sink into the roles she was required to play, whether the jaded singer Cherie in *Bus Stop*, or the lonely, troubled Roslyn in *The Misfits*, because as she told the press in 1955, "I didn't like a lot of my pictures. I'm tired of sex roles. I'm going to broaden my scope. People have scope you know... they really do."

*How did Marilyn's reading compare to that of
her contemporaries?*



Apart from Marilyn Monroe, who else was known for being an avid reader in Hollywood? Montgomery Clift, James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Elizabeth Taylor were all connected either to Marilyn, or each other, and in some cases both. They all liked reading and they all shared a similar star appeal. When Clift and Taylor appeared together in *A Place in the Sun* (1951) they were described as “the most beautiful couple in Hollywood.”

There is one major difference though between these four actors and Marilyn. Despite a shared love of reading, they faced much less doubt or skepticism about the type of books they read. When they were photographed reading, nobody mocked the pictures as being staged, and nobody laughed when they expressed their intentions to star in literary adaptations. There are some obvious reasons to explain this. First: gender. Clift, Dean, and Brando were not subjected to the sexist assumptions applied to women and their intelligence. And second: class. Anglo-American Taylor was born in London to privileged and prominent parents whose social circle included politicians and artists such as Augustus John and Laura Knight. She attended the prestigious Byron House Montessori School in Highgate, which based its educational ethos on that of Maria Montessori, the first female physician in Italy in the nineteenth century (promoting children’s natural interests rather than adhering to formal teaching methods). So, although Taylor was a woman, she had a certain level of cultural and social capital that left her less open to intellectual ridicule. Marilyn had none of these advantages, coming from a fractured working-class family with an absent father, a disrupted childhood, and an education that saw her change schools almost every year. So, bearing all this in mind, it becomes even more interesting to explore how her reading compared to that of others.

Probably the male equivalent of Marilyn in terms of legacy, longevity, fan base, and reputation is James Dean. They both represent that loss of promise, gone too soon, a sense of being extinguished before they even properly got started. Both have a devoted following, both have a lingering cultural fascination with their deaths, and both have instantly recognizable images. Dean’s red jacket from *Rebel Without a Cause* is just as iconic as Marilyn’s “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” dress. But whereas Marilyn is known (justly or unjustly) for being sweet, sensitive, highly strung even, Dean’s reputation is very different, and this is where gender plays a role. Marilyn was regarded as difficult; Dean was rebellious. Marilyn was regarded as tragic and sad; Dean was brooding and moody. Marilyn was seen as always playing the same role, whereas Dean, despite playing tortured young men, was regarded as having emotional depth and range. This is not to discredit Dean, or his genius, but rather to highlight how the gendered lens of culture allows a very different filter to be applied, one that usually shows men in a much more flattering light.

Like Marilyn, Dean suffered loss in his childhood when his beloved mother died, and

his father was mostly absent. Unlike Marilyn though, he did grow up in a stable and loving home with his aunt, uncle, and cousins on a farm in Fairmount, Indiana. There is debate about whether Dean was dyslexic, with some friends claiming that he struggled to read but luckily had a good memory, so learning lines was not a problem. Other friends claimed this was nonsense and that Dean happily read books with no problem at all. What we do know about Dean's reading habits comes from photographs and the odd comment made by his friends. We also know in the years after his death that biographers debated whether Dean really did read his books, or whether they were for "show"—a startling resemblance to the type of comments made about Marilyn.

Probably one of the most famous images of Dean reading was taken on a trip to his childhood home in Indiana with photographer Dennis Stock. The two men had met at a Hollywood party in January 1955, and Stock asked Dean if he would be interested in doing a photo essay for *Life* depicting the personal and professional life of a young actor. Dean agreed, and the shoot took place the following month (it would be published in March under the title "Moody New Star"), covering locations in Indiana, New York, and Los Angeles. Dean's small apartment five stories up on West Sixty-Eighth Street had two round windows that resembled portholes in a ship's cabin. The bookshelves were filled with volumes of plays, as well as Shakespeare, Kafka, and Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, a radical comic strip. In one shot, like Marilyn, Dean is pictured in Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio; others show him on set, and more personal ones around his childhood farm. In one striking image, Dean is sitting at the family dining table, with a wall calendar visible behind his right shoulder, and a patterned cloth covering the table. Wearing a black shirt and his customary tortoiseshell glasses, and with a cigarette in his left hand, Dean is holding a copy of *The Complete Poetical Works of James Whitcomb Riley*. The edition he owned was published in 1941 with a faint green sketch of a tree on the cover and a preface by Donald Culross Peattie. At 886 pages long it was an impressive volume, so it is little wonder that Dean is resting the edge of the heavy book on the table. In the corner of the shot is a packet of Dean's favorite Winston cigarettes. Riley was a popularist poet, known for his children's verse and for writing slightly sentimental poems in dialect, which just happened to be Indiana based—both Riley and Dean were Hoosiers. Dean's favorite poem was "We Must Get Home," a nostalgic piece that yearns for the safety and familiarity of home, depicting deep longing and a wish to escape the unpleasant realities of life. For a young man like Dean, who had grown up in an idyllic setting surrounded by love, who was then living in the competitive, sometimes brutal, world of Hollywood, there are lines that must have resonated, which is presumably why it became his favorite:

We must get home; and, unremembering there
All gain of all ambition otherwhere,
Rest—from the feverish victory, and the crown
Of conquest whose waste glory weighs us down.

Dennis Stock recalled that there was a particular poignancy about Dean, a rising star in Hollywood, sitting in his childhood home reading a poem about longing for the past

because “it was also the realization that the meteoric rise to fame that had already begun... had cut him off forever from his small-town Midwestern origins, and that he could never really go home again.” In contrast, Marilyn would yearn for a home and family she never had to begin with, a sort of make-believe nostalgia. In fact, some of the only possessions she retained from her childhood were books. For Dean, the belief that he would never go home again became quite literally true. He was dead seven months after the photograph was taken. At his funeral, “Goin’ Home,” a song adapted from Dvorak’s *New World Symphony*, was played on the organ.

Dean recited some poems while sitting at the table; frustratingly, we don’t know which, but he was attempting to project a more serious, artistic side. He shared Marilyn’s irritation at the media’s superficial interest in his romantic life. When asked in an interview if he was in love, he repeated the question back to the interviewer and gave an unexpected answer: “Am I in love? Absolutely. I’m in love with ancient philosophers, foreign painters, classic authors, and musicians who have died long ago. I’m a passionate lover. I fawn over these people. I have given them my heart and my soul.” Like Marilyn, he wanted to show there was more to him than just the Hollywood star, and in his case, he was believed.

Also, like Marilyn, Dean seemed to read across a number of different genres. He was photographed on the set of *Giant* with Elizabeth Taylor reading a copy of *Look* magazine, but he also owned copies of the Bible, *Charlotte’s Web* by E. B. White, *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, Kafka’s *The Castle*, *Fear and Trembling* by Kierkegaard, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon*, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by T. E. Lawrence, short stories by Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and a book about Aztec history, and other authors just visible on his bookshelves are Oscar Wilde and a book of French literature containing short stories. Like Marilyn, he also owned a copy of *Dance to the Piper* by Agnes de Mille, published in 1952 (which makes one wonder if that was one of those books of the year among up-and-coming actors in the business). He was gifted a copy of *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry that he kept on his bedside table and would frequently read aloud or to friends. One of his favorite lines was “Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction.” Dean even met John Steinbeck when he was in the running for the part of Cal in the film adaptation of *East of Eden*. Dean was sent to Steinbeck’s brownstone on East Seventy-Second Street in New York, and although Steinbeck found him to be “a snotty kid” he also agreed that “he sure as hell” was Cal. The author of *Giant*, Edna Ferber, visited the film set in Marfa, Texas, in 1955 and found Dean to perfectly embody her character of Jett Rink.

Writer Jason Colavito addresses the accusations that Dean used his books for intellectual posturing. He breaks down the myths that Dean fake-read his books, showing how the idea of him being a nonreader was distorted and exaggerated by biographers as the years passed after his death. A “friend” of Dean’s, composer Leonard Rosenman, apparently began the whole debate by claiming that “one night Jimmy was at my house reading Kierkegaard’s gloomy *Fear and Trembling*. I noticed that after about five minutes he was still on the first page, painfully following every word with his finger and forming

the words unconsciously with his lips. When I suggested that he might try a little lighter introduction to the subject, he slammed the book shut and stormed out in a rage.” Colavito points out the unlikely truth of this claim, given the first page of the book is a straightforward retelling of the Abraham–Isaac story, but from this Rosenman claimed that Dean rarely read books. What is fascinating are the parallels between this depiction of Dean reading and the one that Arthur Miller gave of Marilyn reading E.E. Cummings—the mouthing of the words, the doubt that there was much understanding going on, the claim that books were rarely finished. Colavito goes on to offer proof that Dean did indeed read his books, pointing out a book report he gave to a radio reporter about Aztec history and a reference he made about a Mark Twain story to actor Dennis Hopper. William Bast, Dean’s close friend and lover, recounted (and photographed) Dean gifting him a book of French literature in which Dean had highlighted a story he enjoyed and wanted Bast to read.

Dean certainly does not share the ditzzy reputation that has been bestowed on Marilyn, but he does seem to have had doubt thrown on his intellectual abilities, with some friends, such as Rosenman, mocking Dean’s attempts to tackle heavy-going literature. Colavito credits this to professional jealousy, but it is also worth considering whether there was any snobbery involved too, with Dean’s upbringing as a “farm boy” from Indiana. (People would comment on the twang to his accent.)

And in a final aside, there was apparently a Hollywood near miss when Dean and Monroe almost appeared on-screen together. *Niagara* director Henry Hathaway wanted to film W. Somerset Maugham’s novel *Of Human Bondage*, with Dean and Monroe as Philip Carey, a prim Englishman, and Mildred Rogers, a poor waitress whom he falls for. He proposed this production in 1954 to Darryl F. Zanuck, who was not interested. According to Marilyn’s friend Shelley Winters, Monroe and Dean did meet, however, and indeed had a romance for a weekend, and even decided they might get married, but there is no documented evidence that they ever met, let alone were planning a wedding.

One actor whom Monroe definitely met, and costarred with, was Montgomery Clift. Like Dean, Clift was often portrayed as a brooding heartthrob, mysterious and sensitive. And like Dean, there were rumors about his sexuality. Clift shared with Marilyn certain mental struggles, especially depression, exacerbated by addiction issues and alcohol abuse. When the two starred together in *The Misfits*, Frank Taylor, the film’s producer, noted that “Monty and Marilyn were psychic twins. They recognized disaster in each other’s faces and giggled about it.” But even back in 1949, Marilyn had told a journalist she was “starry-eyed” over Clift and how impressed she was with his talent. By the time they were colleagues, other journalists noticed that Marilyn always felt protective toward him. She told W. J. Weatherby, “I [just] saw Monty Clift. That man is beautiful, but he’s killing himself slowly. Or, not too slowly.” Clift rated Marilyn as an actor: “Marilyn was an incredible person to act with... the most marvelous I ever worked with, and I have been working for 29 years.”

Unlike Marilyn, Clift had enjoyed a mostly privileged childhood with a mother who wanted to raise her children like aristocrats, involving private tuition, travel around Europe, and becoming fluent in French and German. These credentials ensured that

Clift's intellectual abilities were never doubted. In 1929 the family was hit by the Wall Street crash and had to downsize, though this did not stop Clift's mother from traveling with her children. It was while he was living in Switzerland and France that Clift started to develop an interest in acting, though he would not take his first role until he was thirteen, back in America. His initial success was as a stage actor, and he was reluctant to become involved in films, refusing to sign with any studio. When he finally did, he insisted on a much larger-than-usual amount of freedom, which did not bother the major Hollywood studios, which were quite simply desperate to sign him. Despite his Hollywood success he was mostly described as a "reserved homebody," a label people often used to place on Marilyn. While at home Clift seemed to engage in reading and owned an extensive personal library. Unlike Marilyn, who did not sign her name in her books, Clift often did, stating his ownership and dating them with a year and location.

Books in Clift's personal library included *Beasts and Super-Beasts* by Saki, *Candida* by George Bernard Shaw, Maurice Colbourne's *Charles the King* (inscribed to the actor in 1941 by the author), *Come of Age* by Clemence Dane and Richard Addinsell, *The Company She Keeps* by Mary McCarthy, *Pushkin* by Ernest J. Simmons, *The Rise of the House of Rothschild* by Count Egor Caesar Corti, Robert Ardrey's *Thunder Rock*, *Thurso's Landing* by Robinson Jeffers, and George du Maurier's *Trilby*. Clift was also known to have read *Old Mr. Flood* by Joseph Mitchell, Chekhov, Aristotle, and *From Here to Eternity* by James Jones (Clift then starred in the film adaptation). He was also photographed reading *Look* magazine and *The New Yorker*.

In another parallel to Marilyn, in 1958, Clift was photographed reading a copy of *Ulysses*. The photograph, however, is a still from the film *The Young Lions*, a popular World War II drama. Clift plays a character named Noah Ackerman, a Jewish department store clerk who is drafted into the US Army. During basic training, Noah, who is physically much smaller, is bullied and tormented, though he gains respect by standing up to the men who threaten him. One scene shows Noah lying on his barracks bed in full uniform (with great hair) reading *Ulysses*. A group of men sitting behind are turning to look at him, sneering. Some immediate points to consider are when Marilyn read *Ulysses* for real, she was mocked. When Clift in character is reading *Ulysses* for a scene in a film, he was also mocked. Despite facing general skepticism, we know that Marilyn actually read *Ulysses*. We do not know if Noah in the film, or indeed Clift in real life, ever read *Ulysses* (in the image Noah is about a third of the way through the book). In the Eve Arnold images Marilyn is accused of using *Ulysses* as a prop. In the image of Clift/Noah, the book *is* an actual prop. This tells us something about what the book is supposed to signify—brains over brawn, intelligent sensitivity over "traditional" masculinity. But out of all the books in the world, why use *Ulysses*? The most likely explanation is that it is a shortcut to indicate how intellectual a character is, and how adventurous. (Remember, *Ulysses* had been banned in America since it was serialized in 1920 for being obscene and did not appear in an authorized version until 1934.) This is a book with a scandalous publishing history. The film's director is relevant too. Edward Dmytryk was one of the Hollywood Ten, the blacklisted group of film professionals who refused to testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947. He was fired by RKO Radio

Pictures and fled to England. Four years later he was back in front of HUAC naming individuals and destroying their careers in order to revive his own. As a former member of the Communist Party, Dmytryk admitted his politics influenced his filmmaking: "Good or bad, I make pictures a great deal more for people than for the elite. Although I hope I have never insulted the taste of the intellectuals." *The Young Lions* perfectly encapsulates this philosophy, a popularist film with nods to the intelligentsia.

Clift's costar was Marlon Brando (though they never appear on-screen together). Despite being regarded as *the* Method actors of their time, they disliked the label, and Brando had become an actor in a very different environment from Clift. Both had been born in Omaha, Nebraska, but rather than private tuition and European travel, Brando was born into a much more modest family and mostly brought up by his housekeeper. As a child Brando became known as a mimic and as a disruptive student. He was expelled from high school and ended up in a military academy, where he was also threatened with expulsion. Like Dean, Brando may or may not have been dyslexic, but the educational environment was not for him, and he left school without a diploma. This left him in a similar position to Marilyn, with a lifelong ambition to educate himself. In many ways this hunger for reading keeps an actor's mind alive; it would be hard to appear dynamic on-screen with an empty head. Brando had a similar reputation to Dean as a rebel, and as a powerful, unique actor, though Brando was presented in a more obviously sexual way. Dean longed to be an amalgamation of himself, Clift, and Brando, and would playfully sign letters, "Monty Brandean."

Like Marilyn, Brando found himself accepted into Lee Strasberg's Actors Studio after he gained success on the stage in New York. Unlike Marilyn, he hated Strasberg and thought him a user and a fraud: "After I had some success, Lee Strasberg tried to take credit for teaching me how to act. He never taught me anything. He would have claimed credit for the sun and the moon if he believed he could get away with it. He was an ambitious, selfish man who exploited the people who attended the Actors Studio and tried to project himself as an acting oracle and guru. Some people worshipped him, but I never knew why." This connection did bring Brando and Monroe together though, and if gossip is to be believed, they apparently enjoyed a brief romance. Brando always refused to speak about Marilyn.

Brando worshiped books and, like Marilyn, read across an array of genres. When his personal library first went up for auction in 2005 there were over three thousand books. None were particularly valuable editions but rather well-read, well-thumbed, and revealed an engaged reader who wrote plenty of marginalia. Author Rebecca Rego Barry noted that there were scripts and memorabilia that represented his acting career (*The Godfather*, *Apocalypse Now*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*), as well as a library containing French literature, fifty books about Tahiti, 330 books on psychology, self-help, and nutrition, 185 books on politics, law, and philosophy, seventy-five on theology and religion, collections on Native American and Indigenous peoples, classic literature, contemporary literature, Gabriel García Márquez, Maya Angelou, and James Baldwin. And he owned some of the books that were also found on Marilyn's shelves: *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, *An Actor Prepares* by Konstantin Stanislavski, plays by Tennessee Williams, and *Justine* by

Lawrence Durrell.

Like Marilyn, Brando appeared to favor books being near his bed, but whereas Marilyn had shelves close by, Brando seemed to build his bed quite literally into his bookshelves. Helen Hall from Bonhams, who was tasked with packing and cataloguing Brando's library after his death, described the scene in his Mullholland Drive home: "The majority of them were all on bookshelves above his bed, a whole wall of bookshelves with his bed in the middle of it." He was also known to keep a bookshelf in the greenroom when he was onstage so he would have reading material close by. Fellow actors remembered him returning from used bookstores carrying up to ten books.

Despite having a not-dissimilar upbringing to Marilyn, with abandonment issues in childhood and not graduating high school, Brando does not appear to have been mocked for his self-education quest. Neither does there seem to be any question that he read (and understood) the books in his library. Was this because of his "tough guy" reputation? There is a feeling that you might mock Marlon Brando at your own peril, so people didn't. I wouldn't.

One actor who was most definitely mocked, though not for her intelligence, was Elizabeth Taylor, who was a close friend to James Dean and Montgomery Clift, media-manufactured rival to Marilyn, and, despite being a friend to Brando for decades, only shared the screen with him once, in an adaptation of Carson McCullers's *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967). Taylor agreed to do this film and put her salary on the line to ensure Clift would be cast as her costar, but he died before shooting began, and neither Richard Burton nor Lee Marvin wanted the role, so Brando stepped in.

Elizabeth, being a woman, was subjected to similar scrutiny as Marilyn regarding her beauty, her weight, her personal life, her clothes, her jewels, and her marriages (though to be fair, there was plenty of material here). But, like Clift, Elizabeth's rather well-to-do pedigree seemed to prevent her intelligence from being questioned. If she was mocked for anything it was her extravagant lifestyle and ostentatious displays of wealth. Regarded, even from a young age, as a much more serious actor than Marilyn, Taylor starred in an adaptation of *Jane Eyre* with Orson Welles, and as she got older several Shakespeare productions as well as Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and Agatha Christie's *The Mirror Crack'd* (anyone who has seen this will undoubtedly have a clear picture of the flowery purple hat she wore). There are very few pictures of Elizabeth reading, and those that do exist show her mostly engrossed in *Look* magazine and *McCall's*. She was, however, married twice to one of Hollywood's biggest bibliophiles, Richard Burton, so she is unlikely to have been short of reading material.

The best insight we can get into probably just a small fraction of Taylor's personal library was encapsulated in items up for sale in a 2019 auction by Julien's Auctions, the auction house to the stars. Personally, I became extremely distracted by the caviar sets, the kaftans, a Liz branding iron, Christmas sweaters, crystal wands, and a Chanel hoodie, not to mention Barbra Streisand's DVD *Timeless: Live in Concert* signed by the singer in black felt-tip ink: "For / Elizabeth / who will / always be / timeless / much love / to you! / Barbra / 2001." However, back to books. Taylor seemed to have been gifted most of them, and she owned a lot of celebrity memoirs, including ones by Ginger Rogers, Shirley MacLaine,

Johnny Cash, Kenny Rogers, Barry Manilow, and Siegfried and Roy. Many authors sent her books with personal inscriptions, such as a first edition of *Selected Writings of Truman Capote*, signed in black ink on the front endpaper, “For Elizabeth and Richard / with much love / Truman / July, 1964.” A copy of Dominick Dunne’s *The Way We Lived Then: Recollections of a Well-Known Name Dropper* was inscribed, “For darling Elizabeth Taylor / who appears in this book. / With Love, / Dominick Dunne.” A copy of *Quantum Healing: Exploring the Frontiers of Mind/Body Medicine* by Deepak Chopra was mystically inscribed, “To Elizabeth / Wishing you perpetual youth / joy / & immortality— after / many a winter, the re-emergence / of spring in your quantum / mechanical body. / Love / Deepak. / Spring 1989.” Her copy of Kirk Douglas’s *Last Tango in Brooklyn* was inscribed, “Dear Elizabeth— / We’re too tough!— / Happy New Year and— / Lots of love from / Anne and— / Kirk / Dec. 31, 1995.” A copy of *They Went That-A-Way: How the Famous, the Infamous, and the Great Died* by Malcolm Forbes was inscribed, “Hey Elizabeth— / Get moving / before you get / dug in’!! / Malcolm.” And Donald Spoto’s *Marilyn Monroe: The Biography* was inscribed, “For Elizabeth Taylor— / with very great / respect, admiration and friendship, / Donald Spoto.” Elizabeth Taylor being Elizabeth Taylor also owned a copy of the book she wrote and illustrated when she was fourteen called *Nibbles and Me*, all about the adventures she enjoyed with her inseparable pet chipmunk. Nibbles almost appeared in the *Courage of Lassie* with Taylor but was so well behaved he didn’t look real and had his scenes cut.

Another spectacular item up for auction was a fake book with Florentine endpapers and gilt edges. The center pages were cut out to form a book safe, possibly where Taylor hid her priceless jewels if she traveled without her usual armed guards.

Although Monroe and Taylor were not particularly close, neither were they the rivals the media liked to present them as. They had respect for each other, and when Fox fired Marilyn from *Something’s Got to Give*, Marilyn felt this was partly connected to Fox needing to save money due to the amount it was hemorrhaging on the very over-budget *Cleopatra*. When Taylor, who all her life was an advocate for women empowering women, found out Monroe had been fired, she reached out and offered to make a public statement of solidarity, threatening to quit *Cleopatra* unless Marilyn was rehired. Although deeply touched by this offer, Marilyn felt it would only make matters worse. Taylor tried to give Monroe some advice: “No matter what they write about me, Marilyn, I never deny it. I never confirm it. I just keep smiling and walking forward. You do the same.”

Comparing Marilyn’s reading to that of her contemporaries, we find that there are gendered differences, class differences, but possibly most of all, personality differences. Despite many similarities in reading material, Marilyn’s lack of self-confidence left her much more vulnerable to any kind of mocking or undermining. This is not to present her as a victim; Marilyn was tough, but Lauren Bacall noticed that she had a sweet, sensitive side and would get upset if she heard people criticizing her or laughing at her supposed lack of intelligence. Clift was probably the closest to Marilyn regarding personal struggles, though he did seem to be afforded a little more privacy and less skepticism. Dean appeared much more self-contained, not paying much attention to what anyone said

about him. Good luck to anyone who tried mocking Brando. And Elizabeth Taylor was... well, Elizabeth Taylor. She owned a branding iron. Enough said.

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What was Marilyn's impact on writers?



The connections between Marilyn and writers were many, varied, and most certainly two-way. Marilyn loved writers; writers loved Marilyn. There are also literary figures Marilyn never met but nevertheless on whom she left her mark. And there were those she couldn't stand and dodged meeting. In the following list it shouldn't be too difficult to decide which writer belongs where, and even where overlap occurs. Indeed, there was only one whom Marilyn refused to meet, and he was described by Dorothy Parker as "that awful man who stabbed his wife."

DOROTHY PARKER

Dorothy Parker is a good place to start because a less likely friendship is hard to imagine. Marilyn, who was generally regarded as kind and, the word most often used to describe her, "sweet," and Dorothy Parker, who enjoyed eviscerating anyone the minute they left the room, and sometimes before they'd even stood to leave. Yet there were three people who seemed immune from Parker's wrath: Gloria Vanderbilt and her fourth husband, Wyatt Cooper, and Marilyn Monroe. There were two Parker volumes in Marilyn's library, *The Collected Short Stories* and *The Portable Dorothy Parker*. It does seem as though Marilyn was inspired by Parker's famous two-line poem "*Men seldom make passes / At girls who wear glasses*" to form her own observation about women and underwear. She told a reporter, "Men seldom jump hurdles for girls who wear girdles." Marilyn also owned a book that had been favorably reviewed by Parker, possibly even recommended by her—*Malcolm* by James Purdy, which must have been good to get a rare positive review from Parker, who wrote, "Introduced simply as the boy on the bench, the titular character of *Malcolm* is a Candide-like figure who is picked up by the most famous astrologer of his period and introduced to a series of increasingly absurd characters and bizarre situations in the most prodigiously funny book to streak across these heavy-hanging times."

How, when, and why Monroe and Parker first met is not known. There are no records of them meeting, although they were neighbors in West Hollywood in the early 1960s, with Parker on Norma Place and Monroe around the corner on Doheny Drive. Parker, who despite having been nominated for two Academy Awards for her screenwriting, had long been blacklisted for her communist sympathies. She finally landed a screenwriting job in 1961 with her husband Alan Campbell working on a script called *The Good Soup*, a film intended for Monroe. Parker felt that on the one hand, with the combination of Campbells + Soup + Monroe, nothing could go wrong, but on the other hand she still felt the film would never be made. She was, of course, right.

Little is known about this film, but the producer, Charles Brackett, told the *Los Angeles Times* that Parker and Campbell had renamed the film *Love Is for Other People*

and that they were writing it with “sad wisdom, comprehension and wit.” By early 1962 the script was finished, but Parker, who possibly despised Fox more than Monroe, and took to calling them “20th Century Fucks,” complained in a letter to a friend that the studio had hacked and ruined their work, which she referred to as a “darling, bawdy farce.” Although the letter is undated, it must have been written during the difficult filming of *Something’s Got to Give*. Marilyn, experiencing health problems, was frequently failing to show up on set, and it would be in June that Fox fired her. Parker, always on top of studio gossip, which was quite literally her favorite thing—she would lurk in studio bathrooms to eavesdrop—refers to these tensions in her letter, writing, “The studio is beginning to view her [Marilyn] as Marat must have regarded the lethally-poised Charlotte Corday.”

Parker acknowledged that if it had gone ahead, Monroe would have been a “terrible problem, though I am crazy about her.” One of Parker’s Norma Place neighbors noticed that whenever Parker spoke about Marilyn it was with affection; she clearly believed her to be both a beautiful and sensitive creature. Showing real compassion, Parker understood that Monroe could not help her behavior. She felt it came from Monroe being in a perpetual state of terror. (Parker described her as just as frightened as the rest of us but prettier.) And in the August of that year when Marilyn died, Campbell told the gossip columnist Hedda Hopper that Monroe’s death had deeply upset Parker, though the two only knew each other slightly. What a loss to movie history that we never got to see Parker’s bawdy dialogue delivered in Monroe’s inimitable style. I also suspect that the combination of Parker and Monroe on a film set would have been chaos.

TRUMAN CAPOTE

Speaking of films, if he is to be believed, and that’s questionable, Truman Capote claimed he wrote the part of Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* for Marilyn and that she was his first choice for the film role that eventually went to Audrey Hepburn. Paramount Pictures had bought the rights to Capote’s novella in 1958, and it was adapted into a screenplay by George Axelrod (who had written the script for *The Seven Year Itch*). Lee and Paula Strasberg, for reasons known only to them, strongly advised Marilyn not to take the role.

In Marilyn’s personal library she owned a copy of *The Selected Writings of Truman Capote*, and she also owned an LP of *Truman Capote Reading His A Christmas Memory from “Breakfast at Tiffany’s,”* which was inscribed, “*For Marilyn, with love from Truman, 1959.*”

Marilyn and Capote had first met in 1950 on the set of *The Asphalt Jungle*, the John Huston film that is regarded as Marilyn’s breakthrough moment. But their friendship really blossomed when Marilyn walked out on Fox and Hollywood and moved to New York in 1955 to escape the fluffy roles being forced on her and to work toward becoming a more serious actor. Reintroduced by the writer Carson McCullers (more later), Marilyn and Truman spent the spring of 1955 cavorting around Manhattan. Described in

evocative detail by the writer Elizabeth Winder, we can almost smell the cherry blossoms falling in Central Park as the two new friends drank champagne from the bottle, or downed daiquiris at the Waldorf and martinis in the Oak Room at the Plaza. Winder also describes the lazy afternoons the two spent in Chinese restaurants downtown drinking warm white wine, then taking a taxi to the South Street pier to feed seagulls with the fortune cookies that Marilyn had stuffed in her purse.

They were famously photographed dancing together in March 1955 at the El Morocco nightclub. Marilyn, significantly taller than Capote, is dressed all in black, with black heels. At one point she removed her shoes to reduce the height difference. She is looking over her shoulder as Capote has one arm around her waist and the other clumsily grasping her wrist. He looks completely out of his depth, flustered, wearing a pinstripe suit and sporting sweaty, disheveled hair. This makes what he did years later a bit rich. In an essay titled "A Beautiful Child," published in his collection *Music for Chameleons* (1980), Capote recalls a day with Marilyn that began with them sitting together at the funeral of Constance Collier, one of Marilyn's acting coaches. (Capote had brought the two together in 1955 just weeks before Collier died.) According to a highly improbable scenario described by Capote, Marilyn turned up at the funeral home late dressed like a nun, with awful hair, bitten-down nails, telling Capote to fuck himself, calling Queen Elizabeth a four-letter word beginning with *c*, and listening to Capote's claims that he had a one-night stand with Errol Flynn. In fact, the only part of this essay that sounds remotely true is Collier's description of Marilyn as having "this presence, this luminosity, this flickering intelligence... It's so fragile and subtle, it can only be caught by the camera. It's like a hummingbird in flight: only a camera can freeze the poetry of it." Marilyn and Collier had been working on scenes from *Hamlet*, with Monroe as Ophelia. According to Collier, even Greta Garbo believed Marilyn would make an exquisite Ophelia. Despite not liking her films, Garbo believed in Monroe's possibilities as an actor, and she wanted to make a film of Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* with herself in the lead and Marilyn as one of the girls she seduces and destroys.

This essay was published well after Marilyn's death, but she would have read a piece he wrote about her in a book called *Observations* (1959), with photography by Richard Avedon. There is no record of what Marilyn thought of her portrayal by a "friend," but just to give a flavor, Capote uses the following descriptions of Marilyn: "a cabaret-cutie," "a waif figure of saucy pathos," referring to her as being "stained, and illuminated by, the stigmata of orphan-thinking," with "her slippery lips, her overspilling blondness and sliding brassiere straps, the rhythmic writhing of restless poundage wriggling for room inside a roomless décolletage..." And if that wasn't misogynistic enough, he also draws on some casual racism to portray Marilyn's "Japanese-like fits of giggling." Capote is not without form for ridiculing his female friends in print, the worst case being his "swans." Yet Capote lamented Marilyn's death, calling her a sweet girl and a close friend. Years later, when he was living in Hollywood, he would visit her grave, say a prayer, leave flowers, and tell her he hoped she was happy. He would do the same for Natalie Wood, also buried in the same cemetery. We do not know what Marilyn thought of him by the end of her life, but he is buried just around the corner from her in Westwood cemetery,

where his friend Joanne Carson (wife of Johnny) wanted him to be near people he knew.

CARSON McCULLERS AND ISAK DINESEN

In *Observations*, Capote also set his sights on the Danish writer Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen), most known for her memoir *Out of Africa*. She was hugely insulted by his portrayal/betrayal, but he must have been suitably contrite as she forgave him just before she died. Dinesen was a fan of Marilyn's and desperately wanted to meet her while she was visiting New York. A more cynical take on this was that Dinesen wanted to win the Nobel Prize and felt the more publicity and exposure she could get, the better. Monroe and Dinesen had a mutual friend in Carson McCullers, who also knew Arthur Miller. Although there was no Dinesen in Marilyn's library, she did own a copy of McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. In February 1959, the small group was invited to McCullers's home in Nyack, New York, for lunch, an engagement that seemed to cause Marilyn some social anxiety. She called McCullers three or four times to ask what dress she should wear. Dinesen, who at seventy-three was ill and skeletal (and, according to Jeffrey Meyers, ravaged by syphilis), would only eat certain foods and drinks, which happened to be oysters, white grapes, soufflés, and champagne. McCullers served it all on a black marble table. Marilyn was wearing a low-cut black dress with a fur stole, and Dinesen was swathed in a gray turban, clutching her large handbag. McCullers recalled Miller rather pompously questioning Dinesen about her diet, and what sort of doctor would put her on such food and drink. Dinesen replied sharply with, "Doctor? The doctors are horrified by my diet, but I love champagne, and I love oysters, and they agree with me." Undeterred, Miller persisted with asking how she got any protein, and was met with, "I don't know anything about that, but I am old, and I eat what I want and what agrees with me." Then she ignored him and recounted tales of living in Africa.

The lunch, it seems, got quite boozy and descended into dancing. McCullers reported them all dancing on the table, but seeing as she had a walking stick and Dinesen looked so frail, this does seem doubtful. Maybe she meant it metaphorically. Photographs were taken during the afternoon, and the women appeared to be affectionate with each other: McCullers grabbing Marilyn's face and kissing her cheek, and Marilyn sitting next to Dinesen holding her hand. There are also shots taken around the dining table with the guests clinking champagne glasses, and a large fruit bowl in the center containing red grapes, not white, which is perhaps why they remain untouched. A couple of weeks later, Dinesen was still enraptured from meeting Marilyn and wrote to a friend in a letter, "I think Marilyn is bound to make an almost overwhelming impression on the people who meet her for the first time." She described her vitality, strength, and innocence, and compared her to a lion cub: "I had all the wild nature of Africa amicably gazing at me with mighty playfulness."

EDITH SITWELL

Dinesen was not the only grande dame of literature impacted by Monroe. Marilyn and Edith Sitwell first met in January 1953 at the striking art deco Sunset Tower Hotel in Hollywood. If they appeared an unlikely pairing, which to many they did, it seems that was entirely the point. *Life* magazine had commissioned the English aristocrat Sitwell to write a piece for them about her trip to Los Angeles, with her perceptions to be based on meeting various people, one of whom was Marilyn. Sitwell felt there were nefarious reasons for the meeting, suspecting *Life* had more in mind than an information-gathering exercise. In her autobiography she wrote, “But, still more important to them, was that Miss Monroe and I should be brought face to face, since it was obvious that we were born to hate each other, would do so at first sight, and that our subsequent insults to each other would cause a commotion when reported.” However, Sitwell concludes, “They were mistaken.” In fact, the two women got along famously, chatting about their shared love of poetry and philosophy, and discussing the work of Rudolf Steiner, the spiritual philosopher Marilyn was reading at the time. (A copy of his book *Some Characteristics of Today* was in her personal library.) According to Sitwell’s great-niece, the two women bonded over their unhappy childhoods, and the fact that in their own ways both were scrutinized for their looks. Sitwell became protective of Monroe, telling the BBC that she thought Marilyn “had been disgracefully treated, most unchivalrously treated” and persecuted in Hollywood because (and here’s the interesting take) “she had an unfortunate attraction for an extremely unpleasant kind of man whom she avoided assiduously.” Sitwell turns the onus right around here and directly blasts the men in Marilyn’s life who wouldn’t leave her alone. While at the Sunset Tower, Sitwell described Marilyn as behaving “like a lady” and claimed that the scandal of Marilyn’s nude calendar, which had recently broken, was a product of her exploitation and desperate situation: “Perhaps if people have never been poor, they don’t know what it is like to be hungry.” From Marilyn’s point of view, she too was surprised by Sitwell, later saying, “I expected her to be a real English snob, but she wasn’t. She was what my mother would have called a Lady. A grand lady, strong enough to stand up to men.”

The two were photographed during the meeting by George Silk. Sitting face-to-face on a long patterned couch, Sitwell is all in black with a spectacular hat, wearing dark glasses, her handbag on the floor. Marilyn is dressed smartly in a fitted suit with heels and gloves. Two glasses of champagne (empty) are on the table in front of them. Both appear engaged and amused. Looking back, Sitwell offers a beautiful description of Marilyn, who in her green dress with yellow hair looked like a daffodil. Yet she sensed something else going on and noted that “in repose her face was at moments strangely, prophetically tragic, like the face of a beautiful ghost—a little spring-ghost, an innocent fertility daemon, the vegetation spirit that was Ophelia.” As for the rest of Hollywood, Sitwell cast a disapproving eye and informed the BBC on the way she avoided the corruption of the ungodly place: “I only saw people whose behaviour was impeccable, highly educated, and the sort of people I would know in England.”

Sitwell would not complete the piece for *Life*, but she would meet Marilyn twice more, once in London in 1956 at the Sesame Imperial and Pioneer Club on Grosvenor Street while Marilyn was filming *The Prince and the Showgirl*. Sitwell had decided she was

happy to play “literary mother” and told reporters that “Marilyn is a very seriously minded girl,” praising her for everything she had achieved despite her lack of formal education and disrupted childhood. Having chosen to meet in the club’s public bar led to some chaos as people tried to catch a glimpse of Monroe, who was with her then-husband Arthur Miller. Sitwell was not amused and declared they could barely speak because “every kind of person was just hanging about outside and interfering and all the rest of it.” But they did manage to talk about Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas, with Marilyn reciting lines from one of Hopkins’s “terrible sonnets”: “I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day / What hours, O what black hours we have spent / This night!” They drank large beakers of gin and grapefruit juice, and Sitwell felt that the darkness of the world had not dimmed Marilyn’s goodness. In fact, she found her quite remarkable.

Luckily, they did get a chance to meet a third time, privately in New York without the chaos, during which, according to Sitwell, they had a most delightful talk. When Marilyn’s death was announced, Sitwell was distressed but gave a perceptive comment to the *Daily Mirror*: “Marilyn Monroe was lonely. She had a strange ghostlike quality. She wasn’t nearly as sexy as men liked to imagine. She was a sad, sad lovely girl.”

Although there were no Sitwell books in Marilyn’s library, she did own a gifted copy of a portrait of Edith Sitwell taken by Phillippe Halsman in 1958, inscribed, “*For Marilyn / P. Halsman.*” Ebonized in a gilt wood frame, the image is a close crop of Sitwell’s face, looking downward, with her hands on either side of her head, showing her black turban and ornate rings. She looks like an alabaster angel.

DYLAN THOMAS

While Marilyn was filming *The Prince and the Showgirl* and meeting writers like Edith Sitwell, between takes on the set she was reading the poetry of Dylan Thomas. A copy of his poems had been gifted to her by Jack Cardiff, the film’s cinematographer, though this copy does not seem to have survived. The only Thomas in Marilyn’s existing library is *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. Six years earlier Thomas and Monroe had met in Hollywood through Shelley Winters. In 1950, the two women had been sharing an apartment on Holloway Drive in West Hollywood. Thomas, who was on his first reading tour of America, traveling coast-to-coast and stopping off at various cities and universities, had two wishes when he arrived in Hollywood. One was to meet a “beautiful blonde starlet” (this wish also included doing something to said starlet, but we don’t need that level of detail), and the second was to meet Charlie Chaplin. Luckily for Thomas he had both wishes granted on the same night.

Sadly, the myths about this meeting and what did or did not happen or what was or was not exaggerated are unclear. It is the sort of story that however ludicrous it sounded could very well be true. According to some, Thomas had worked his way across America leaving a trail of disappointed and outraged people in his wake as the poet drank excessively and behaved outrageously, especially when he was offstage. His lewd jokes, leering behavior to women, and apparently once not quite making it to the toilet in time horrified the literati. By the time he got to Hollywood he was, some sources claim,

introduced to Shelley Winters by the writer Christopher Isherwood. Through Winters, Thomas managed to get an invite to a party Charlie Chaplin was throwing at his house, but first he was invited for dinner with Marilyn and Shelley at their apartment. Marilyn, notoriously, was no great cook, so she decided to decorate the dinner table, and even traveled into the Hollywood suburbs to pick fresh wildflowers to adorn the table. Shelley took control of the cooking but when she had to dash to the store, she left Marilyn to wash the salad leaves. She returned a half hour later to find Marilyn religiously and diligently washing every single leaf individually with a Brillo pad and great care. When their guest arrived, the drinks started flowing immediately, though it's fair to assume they were not the first of the evening, for Thomas at least. They drank several martinis and bottles of beer and wine, and then decided in their drunken wisdom to *drive* to Chaplin's house party. With Thomas behind the wheel and the two women as passengers, they made quite an entrance as Thomas lost control of the car and crashed into Chaplin's tennis court net. Once inside, Thomas ignored many Hollywood luminaries, declaring the only person he wanted to meet was Chaplin. When he finally did meet him, Chaplin told him off for his drunken and rude behavior, so Thomas walked into the solarium and went to the toilet in a large potted plant. It's a terrific story, and some of it will probably be true.

The one person who was not subjected to Thomas's leering behavior was Marilyn. Winters noted that he treated her with unusual propriety, almost as if he sensed some sort of vulnerability and understood "that she very badly needed not to be thought of as just a tits-and-ass cutie." Yet Winters was keen to dispel the myth of Marilyn as a fragile, damaged woman: "All this stuff about being doomed and having a miserable life is totally untrue." Their time as roommates was "exciting and wonderful." Yet Dylan never once made a pass at Marilyn, not even verbally. He saved his jokes and teasing for Winters.

JOHN STEINBECK

In April 1955 John Steinbeck wrote a letter to Marilyn requesting an autograph for his young nephew Jon Atkinson, who had "his foot in the door of puberty, but that is only one of his problems. You are the other." The letter, filled with affection toward both his nephew and Marilyn, was apparently dictated by Steinbeck and signed and initialed by his secretary. It was found with Marilyn's other correspondence after her death, indicating that she had at least read and kept it. Steinbeck is in playful mood, saying, "I know that you are not made of celestial ether, but he doesn't," and requesting that Marilyn send a signed photograph, "perhaps in pensive, girlish mood." One interesting feature of the letter is that Steinbeck alludes to a previous meeting between him and Marilyn, one that his wife let slip to the nephew ("He doesn't really believe it, but his respect for me has gone up even for lying about it").

Although there is no recorded meeting between the two, there are a couple of occasions when they would have encountered each other. In 1952, Marilyn played a small part in a Twentieth Century-Fox film called *O. Henry's Full House*. The film presented five of the most celebrated short stories by O. Henry, which were linked with a script narrated

by John Steinbeck, who said, “I’ve always believed that a writer should be read, not seen. But, O. Henry’s dead. He can’t speak for himself. I wonder if he would if he could?” Bosley Crowther, reviewing in *The New York Times*, felt that this was regrettable: “It seems a little unfortunate that John Steinbeck, with a painfully gravel-coated voice, has been asked to stand in for the dead author and introduce the tales. He is obviously not O. Henry.” Marilyn’s brief role in the film was that of a streetwalker opposite Charles Laughton, in the segment called “The Cop and the Anthem.” Yet even though she was on-screen just fleetingly, she featured in the trailer and poster advertising the film. This certainly would have put the two of them in the same orbit, possibly even the same studio.

The second time they met, they attended the New York premiere of *East of Eden*, which took place in March 1955, just one month before Steinbeck sent the letter. The film, based on Steinbeck’s novel and starring James Dean (who refused to attend the opening, much to the fury of the studio), opened at the Astor Theatre and doubled as a charity event for the Actors Studio. Marilyn agreed to act as an usherette, and when news broke that she would be there, tickets hit triple their price. After the screening there was a rooftop party at the Astor Hotel across the road, which Steinbeck and the cast found almost impossible to reach, as thousands of Monroe fans had turned up to catch a glimpse of her. Superfan James Haspiel had tried to help her into her limo through the scrum, but he sounded overawed, commenting afterward, “Although she was to me consistently beautiful, there were few moments, this being one of them, when Marilyn looked so outrageously gorgeous that it was actually hard to look at her.”

There are certainly other occasions when Monroe and Steinbeck could have met, especially after she married Arthur Miller, as he and Steinbeck were friends. But so often with Marilyn, myths drift into facts. Some reports suggest that she so loved *East of Eden* that she requested a signed copy from Steinbeck. If this is true and he sent one, it did not form part of her estate (there were three other Steinbeck books in her collection though). As for the letter from Steinbeck to Monroe, doubt too is thrown on its authenticity. Steinbeck mostly wrote personal letters in longhand, and having his secretary sign and initial a letter to Monroe on his behalf seemed peculiar to his family members. More importantly, years later when asked, his nephew confirmed that he never received an autographed photo. Hoax or not, the letter was put up for auction in November 2016 and sold for \$3,520.

TERENCE RATTIGAN

In 1956, while Marilyn was reading Dylan Thomas on the set of *The Prince and the Showgirl*, she was spending most of her days speaking the lines of playwright Terence Rattigan. Her production company had bought the film rights to his play *The Sleeping Prince*. In fact, *The Sleeping Prince* was the working title of the film right up to postproduction, when it was changed, much to Laurence Olivier’s annoyance. Given the stories that emerged from the set, it would seem a change of title was the least of the

problems to arise while filming Rattigan's play. Marilyn was often so late to the set that Olivier exploded at her one day, "Why can't you get here on time for fuck's sake?" To which she replied, "Oh, do you have that word in English too?"

Marilyn had first met Rattigan at a press conference in New York to announce the film and told Pete Martin of *The Saturday Evening Post* that "I had a very bad cold the evening I spent with Mr. Rattigan, and he said I sounded like Tallulah Bankhead." She was photographed flanked by Olivier and Rattigan, her arms thrown around their necks, all smiles (this would change soon enough). During filming, Rattigan threw a party in Marilyn's honor at his country home in Windlesham, Surrey, about seven miles from where Monroe and Miller were staying in Englefield Green. When their chauffeur-driven car arrived at the private driveway to the house they were detained by a constable. Each guest had been told they had to show an invitation, but since the party was in Marilyn's honor she did not have one, and they were denied entry. At this point someone leapt from the passenger side of the car, brandishing an empty wineglass in the policeman's face, telling him to move: "It's Marilyn, you fool, get out of the way." The policeman looked in the back seat, saw Marilyn, and immediately realized his gaffe. The car sped off down the drive.

What awaited Marilyn when she stepped from the car, wearing an ivory gown borrowed from the studio and long pearl earrings, was a white mansion and a large garden full of trees twinkling with fairy lights, and candles flickering on the fishpond. Rattigan had invited an array of people he thought Marilyn might find interesting, such as John Gielgud, Margot Fonteyn, Peggy Ashcroft, Alec Guinness, and members of the English aristocracy. Marilyn's costar Sybil Thorndike also attended, and the two sat in the garden pavilion discussing the poet Virgil. As the moon came up, music was played on the record player and Marilyn and Arthur Miller danced to Cole Porter's "I Get a Kick Out of You." Rattigan taught Marilyn his version of the Charleston, and Marilyn's pick of songs was Gershwin's "Embraceable You." At three a.m. the party wound down, and the next day Marilyn sent her host a note thanking him for a magical evening. Rattigan noted that it was a friendly party, that Marilyn was a huge hit with his guests, and that "there was no damage at all."

Two months later, Marilyn produced a piece of art for a charity auction in aid of the Actors' Orphanage Fund. Titled *Myself Exercising*, the painting, possibly a self-portrait, was a freestyle yellow watercolor abstract of a woman with long hair bending over exercising with weights (something Marilyn had done for many years). She signed it "Marilyn Monroe Miller, Sept. 1956." On the evening of the auction, with Olivier acting as auctioneer, there were few bids, so Rattigan stepped in, snatching up the piece for a mere forty pounds. I say *a mere forty pounds* because it was no great work of art. If you google this image, a swirl of yellow-golden lines and curves, you will see that he must have had much support for the charity in question to pay that amount. It does seem, however, as though Marilyn intended for the painting to be humorous. This artwork remained in Rattigan's care until his death, when it was included as part of his estate sale. It was last sold at auction in 2021 for \$125,000.

SYLVIA PLATH

Sylvia Plath was roughly a contemporary of Marilyn's, born only six years after Marilyn in 1932 and dying only six months after Marilyn in 1963. The two never met, and as far as we know Marilyn never read Plath, who published only one collection of poetry in her lifetime, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960). Plath did, however, have a first-reading contract with *The New Yorker*, which published many of her poems, especially in the early '60s, so Marilyn may well have encountered her work via that magazine, but we simply do not know. Plath, on the other hand, was well aware of Monroe, and perhaps even saw some parallels in their lives, both having married literary men (Ted Hughes, Arthur Miller) who were regarded as the best in their trade. Though Plath is sometimes referred to as the "Marilyn Monroe of modern literature," aside from living in the same cultural moment, with similar influences, and even *lack* of influences—both lived pre-second-wave feminism—there were deep differences to their lives. Most notably Plath's problematic, yet close, relationship with her mother in contrast to Marilyn's absent mother. Plath retained family support throughout her life, something Marilyn never had and which was noted by many of her "friends" in Hollywood. But possibly the biggest comparison between the two is that they are both stereotypically portrayed as beautiful, tragic women who died, accidentally or not, by their own hand, representations that flatten out and overlook their vitality, joy, and bravery.

Monroe's impact on Plath is clear. She is mentioned in both Plath's letters and journals, always favorably, and presented as the pinnacle of female beauty. As a young woman in the 1950s and a great cinemagoer, Plath clearly absorbed the pinups and aesthetic ideals of the time. Oddly, photographs of Plath and Monroe when they were in their mid-teens show a remarkable physical similarity. And in her early twenties, Plath bleached her hair a Monroe blond, referring to it as her "Platinum Summer." This similarity faded as Plath got older.

In 1953, when a twenty-year-old Plath was writing to her brother giving him wise older-sister advice on women (her brother Warren would have been eighteen, so sorely in need of it), a poor girl named Kathy falls far short in Plath's eyes. Writing mostly in lower case, as many of us are wont to do in our younger years, she advises her brother, "do be nice to Kathy even though she may not be Marilyn Monroe. she can't help that. much!" Shade!

Then, three months later, saying goodbye to her boyfriend who has joined the navy, Plath wrote him a letter speculating on the state of his barracks, wondering "whether you have minor luxuries, such as bedside bars with hot and cold running champagne, fritos and caviar, and a marilyn monroeish Wave to rouse you from slumber in the morning by crooning—'Oh, what a Beautiful Day.'" Again, Monroe appears as the ideal form of femininity. It's also interesting that Plath links her with the military because it would be another seven months before Monroe performed for soldiers in Korea, shortly after marrying Joe DiMaggio. And speaking of DiMaggio, according to Plath, when she broke her leg skiing, her fractured fibula was set by the same doctor who removed the spur from DiMaggio's ankle.

Monroe appears only once in Plath's existing journals, and it is hard not to think that her reading material influenced this entry. In September 1959 Plath was staying at the Yaddo artists and writers retreat in Saratoga Springs. Her journal notes that she is sitting warming her feet on the stove in a cabin in the woods reading Arthur Miller. Two weeks later, Plath wrote, "Marilyn Monroe appeared to me last night in a dream as a kind of fairy godmother." Plath, who could be brilliantly sharp-tongued, seemed to view Marilyn affectionately, even in her dreams. She continued, "I spoke, almost in tears, of how much she and Arthur Miller meant to us, although they could, of course, not know us at all." Monroe then proceeds to give Plath an expert manicure, and Plath asked for advice about hairdressers. Dream Plath clearly made an impression on Dream Marilyn because Plath noted, "She invited me to visit her during the Christmas holidays, promising a new, flowering life." At the same time as dreaming this, Plath was writing a poem called "The Stones," recounting a suicide attempt she made years earlier and how she was stitched back together with the promise of a new life: "My mendings itch. There is nothing to do. / I shall be good as new."

It is perfectly possible that Plath wrote about Marilyn's death in August 1962. Plath herself was going through a terrible summer with the breakdown of her marriage and struggling with suicidal ideation. It seems impossible that she would not have heard about it, and even more unlikely that she didn't mention it in her journal. We do not know for certain, however, since after Plath's death her final two journals "went missing."

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Marilyn and Nabokov do seem to be two figures who would be worlds apart and yet they did indeed meet once at a dinner party in Los Angeles in the spring of 1960. He was in Hollywood working on the screenplay of his novel *Lolita*, and Marilyn was living in the Beverly Hills Hotel while filming *Let's Make Love*. They seemed to be equally impressed with each other. Nabokov recalled Marilyn was "gloriously pretty, all bosom and rose," and she invited him and his wife Véra to a dinner party, which they failed to attend. Although this face-to-face meeting seemed to be a brief one-off event, there is speculation that Nabokov studied Monroe and immortalized her in at least two of his books. He used Marilyn both for loose inspiration for other characters and portrayed her as herself, a key Hollywood figure, just as Ian Fleming did in *From Russia, with Love*.

The novel *Ada* (1969) tells the story of the titular character who is an actor receiving ridiculous lessons from a coach named Stan Slavsky (based on Stanislavski) and who, critics debated, may or may not have killed herself at the end of this rather opaque novel. Monroe, it is argued, acted as inspiration for certain aspects of Ada's life and personality. An earlier book, *Pale Fire* (1962), is a novel presented as a 999-line poem written by fictional poet John Francis Shade, an English professor, covering the last twenty days of his life. He reflects upon life, death, and immortality, and makes satirical comments about television. The title poem contains a line referring to "The famous face flowed in, fair and inane," describing the parted lips and body of a woman who is used for "corporate desire." Many readers see this as a reference to Monroe, who was still alive when the book

was published in America in May 1962. One scene in the novel does make an overt reference to Marilyn since she appears in the chapter as herself. John Shade's daughter Hazel, a character Nabokov portrays as unattractive and unhappy, decides to kill herself. As she steps off the bus to carry out this act, on the TV in the family home Marilyn Monroe appears, as if to emphasize the suffocating and deadly power of beauty ideals. *Pale Fire* may have committed Monroe to the literary pages of Nabokov's novel for all time, but the reviewer for *The New York Times*, Orville Prescott, summed up the novel: "It probably was fun for Mr. Nabokov to write. It is a bore to read." There were no books by Nabokov found in Marilyn's personal library.

NORMAN MAILER

A writer who never met Marilyn, but would have dearly loved to, was Norman Mailer (see Dorothy Parker's description of him at the beginning of this chapter as the awful man who stabbed his wife). Despite trying his best to inveigle an invitation, none was forthcoming, with Marilyn disliking his work and, after reading her copy of *The Deer Park*, claiming, "He's too impressed by power, in my opinion." Marilyn's friend the poet Norman Rosten recalled that she actively avoided meeting Mailer, saying she was "busy," that she "had nothing to say," that he was "too tough," and that "I read his books. I haven't time for any more writers." According to Shelley Winters, the two met in 1948 at a rally for Henry Wallace, Roosevelt's vice president. But in all of Mailer's copious writings about Marilyn he never mentions this, so it could be that Winters was mistaken. Mailer himself claims he sat behind Marilyn once in the Actors Studio in New York but was never introduced to her. Instead, in his "novel biography" *Marilyn* (1973), in which he refers to himself in the third person, he describes living close to Miller and Monroe in Connecticut and waiting for a call for a meeting that never came: "The secret ambition after all had been to steal Marilyn; in all his vanity he thought no one was so well suited to bring out the best in her as himself." *Marilyn* wasn't the only work he produced about Monroe; he also wrote *Of Women and Their Elegance* (1980) and in 1986 produced a stage play called *Strawhead*.

Mailer's work on Monroe, and some would even use the word *obsession* to describe his relationship to Monroe, was controversial for its fictionalized nature. *Marilyn* combined aspects of biography with novelistic writing, relying on what Mailer called "factoids." The term itself threw doubt on the contents of his essay since Mailer's definition was "facts which have no existence before appearing in a magazine or newspaper." *The Washington Times* interpreted this explanation as "something that looks like a fact, could be a fact, but in fact is not a fact." Some might call this fiction. The book was essentially a vehicle for the photographs of Marilyn taken by Lawrence Schiller, Milton H. Greene, and Bert Stern, and Mailer's piece formed an extended introductory essay. But the use of sexualized imagery offended many (example: "She excited dreams of honey for the horn," etc.). Mailer admitted he wrote the text for money and made it as sellable as he could, but even if we condemn him for making things up, it still won't be as bad as the line "Her breasts popped buds and burgeons on flesh over many a queuing sweaty moviegoer's face."

Mailer did not learn his lesson with *Marilyn*. Seven years later in *Of Women and Their Elegance*, once again using photographs for the central point of the book, this time solely by Greene, he produced an imaginary memoir written as Marilyn in the first person. Having said he didn't learn his lesson, perhaps he didn't need to, as *Marilyn* was his biggest-selling work after *The Naked and the Dead*. Mailer drew on real interviews and used more of his "factoids" to depict the innermost thoughts of Marilyn as she conversed with Miller and Greene. Once again, the book takes a sexual tone, recounting a "factoid" about Marilyn in a changing room in New York whipping off her skirt to reveal no underwear and emitting some of her "natural odor." Most of these scenarios are much more revealing about the author than the subject.

Realizing he would receive backlash over this technique, in a preemptive move Mailer published an essay in *New York* magazine called "Before the Literary Bar." In this piece Mailer conducts his own imaginary trial, having been charged with criminal literary negligence, and is the only witness called to justify the quality of his book. When asked about its reliability the following exchange occurs:

PROSECUTOR: It is made up.

MAILER: More or less made up.

PROSECUTOR: Could you be more specific?

MAILER: Much of the book is based on fact. I would say some of it is made up.

Other statements are "I can't certify it as a fact, but I believe it is a fact" and "Not literally true, but aesthetically true," and at one point Mailer admits that inventing a scene where Marilyn is an accessory to murder, plotting with her married lover to kill his wife, is ethically dubious.

In the least-shocking fictional verdict ever, Mailer's judge decides that the book is a serious enough work for the author to avoid censure but is downright dangerous: "He almost certainly will be reprimanded for making up false and sordid episodes concerning public figures."

Mailer adapted *Of Women and Their Elegance* into a play called *Strawhead*, apparently an FBI code name for Marilyn. Cowritten with Richard Hannum, the play imagines a series of interviews that take place between Marilyn and Mailer in August 1962. Work began on the production as early as 1980, and an early draft of the first acts was presented at the Actors Studio. One scene included a stereotypical "Marilyn" giving a blow job to Mailer (another case of the work saying more about the author), but Ellen Burstyn and Shelley Winters, who were present, blasted Mailer for his misogyny and for disrespecting Marilyn's memory. He would later write to playwright Larry L. King that he did not intend to "be dictated to by a bunch of Stalinoid dykes."

By 1982 the script was finished, and casting was taking place. At a Park Avenue dinner thrown by lawyer and consultant Claus von Bülow, a figure with whom Mailer must have shared much in common, neither being particularly uxorious, an actor named Kate Fitzpatrick was present, who Mailer felt was perfect for the role. Sadly, she was already cast to play Marilyn in another production that year. Susan Sarandon also turned down the

role, which eventually ended up going to Mailer's daughter, so one can be thankful that the earlier blow job scene had been removed by this point. The play was generally regarded as a commercial failure and received mixed reviews, not least from Bonnie Greer, who noted it was more about chronicling Mailer's life as "the Great White Male Heterosexual."

In 2024 a script of the play annotated by Mailer and Hannum sold at auction. It had a reserve price of \$400–\$500. It sold for \$400.

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*What was the literary impact of, and on,
Arthur Miller?*



She was a whirling light to me...
When she appeared, the future vanished.

—Arthur Miller, *Timebends*

When Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller married on June 29, 1956, Marilyn had just turned thirty. In this century we have had “Brangelina,” “Bennifer,” etc. Back in the 1950s things were a little more descriptive in the media and rather than being offered “Marthur,” the pair were titled “the Goddess and the Genius” and “the Egghead and the Hourglass.” At eleven years older, Miller was the senior figure in the relationship. Marilyn admitted that the marriage began with a teacher-pupil dynamic. She felt that she learned a great deal from it. When Miller spoke to the press at the time of their marriage, he too gave this impression, of himself as teacher and Marilyn as eager student. He told them that she would come to him with a new word she had heard that day and ask him what it meant, that often she would mispronounce a word until he corrected her, but overall “she wants to learn.” But equally, the relationship soon became something much more than this, as Marilyn herself wrote: “A good marriage is a very delicate balance of many forces.” But even if it began with Miller as teacher, Monroe also defended herself and her abilities: “He wouldn’t have married me if I were nothing but a dumb blonde.” Miller would have much to learn from Marilyn about acting and working in the film industry. And if we think about all the ways Miller may have influenced her reading, we must remember that even before she met him, hundreds of Marilyn’s books were already there on her bookshelves following her from home to home.

Yet a renowned playwright in New York cannot fail to have some literary influence. After all, one of their first meetings involved visiting a bookshop to buy poetry (Frost, Whitman, Cummings) and an Arthur Miller play. But interestingly, beyond that anecdote and his observation that he rarely saw Marilyn finish a book, Miller doesn’t talk at any length about her reading habits, or whether they suggested books to each other, or even if they shared books.

Only one disturbing story is included in Miller’s autobiography *Timebends* about a reading incident that upset Marilyn. We do not know if Miller suggested the work of Bernard Malamud, though they certainly knew each other. Marilyn was reading Malamud’s work that had been published after her marriage. The two titles she owned were *The Assistant* (1957), a novel about working-class Jewish immigrants in New York, and *The Magic Barrel* (1958), a collection of thirteen short stories. One story in the latter included an upsetting rape scene. This angered Marilyn, who told Miller, “That author doesn’t know what a rape is, and he shouldn’t pretend he does.” Coming from a woman who had both been raped and suffered from ongoing sexual exploitation, Marilyn was not only speaking from experience but was likely triggered by what she had read. Knowing this, Miller’s response was extraordinary. He observed that she was upset because Malamud had represented rape as something less than a catastrophe and that “her outrage could not accept literary irony about a humiliation she had experienced.” He then concluded the whole sorry episode claiming, “And in many another situation, her sense of

humor would collapse whenever painful images were evoked.” In other words, she had a perfectly normal response.

Jean Fidelman Kopelman Haber, a cousin of Bernard Malamud’s, recalled that Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe met Malamud at a literary event. She names this as Malamud’s induction into the Academy of Arts and Sciences, but this is a false memory since this took place in 1967. Malamud did win a number of awards in the 1950s though, including the Rosenthal Award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1958, so it could have been this event where he was being honored. At the meeting, Monroe was sitting in the balcony with Miller’s mother, and Miller and Malamud spent the evening together downstairs. After the ceremony, Miller congratulated Malamud, who replied, “Thank you very much but I’d like to meet your wife.” Apparently, most people in the hall were not paying attention to the literary luminaries onstage but instead trying to catch a glimpse of Marilyn in the balcony, who, Jean said, “happened to be gorgeous.” Given this ceremony took place in 1958, it is possible that Marilyn may have read Malamud’s story before meeting him, though she does not appear to have brought this up and the meeting sounded perfectly friendly, if slightly formal.

Another story Miller tells about Marilyn’s reading habits happened before they were married, when they used to speak each day on the phone. She told him she was reading a book about Goya but that she “hadn’t got to the good part yet.” Next time they spoke she said she was two-thirds of the way through and still waiting for the good part. By the time she reached the end, Miller noted, she was puzzled at never reaching the good part and wondered why the book was written at all. “That’s the way a book ought to be read,” concluded Miller. This sheds some light on how Marilyn read (methodically, in this case) and what she was looking for in a book (a bit of action). But it also highlights how other people’s observations and memories need to be treated carefully, for as we know from Miller’s autobiography, he said he only ever saw Marilyn read one book in its entirety—*Chéri* by Colette.

Looking at other books on Marilyn’s shelves, it is hard to say which may have been influenced by Miller. They must have had so many conversations about novels, plays, and poetry, so the lack of primary material is frustrating. Certainly, Miller would have immersed her in a literary world of dinner parties and award ceremonies and even informal hangouts with his writer friends, but this doesn’t necessarily translate into reading. One book owned by Marilyn stands out as a likely Miller-influenced candidate and that is *The Devil in Massachusetts* (1949) by Marion L. Starkey. This book is a well-researched account of the witch trials that broke out in Salem in the 1690s and applies contemporary psychiatric thought to the genuine trial documents to explain what occurred. Miller relied on this book for his research when writing *The Crucible* (1953), his play about the Salem witch trials, which he treated as an allegory for what was happening during the Red Scare in 1950s America. Some scholars feel this book may have been his main source since he spent only seven days in Salem reading historical documents. In an article for *The New Yorker*, Miller stated he first read about the witch trials while he was in college, having come across a two-volume, thousand-page study by Charles W. Upham, the mayor of Salem, published in 1867. Even then he knew he wanted to write about the

period. It was not until 1949 when he read Starkey's book, in which she pointed out witch hunts were not a thing of the past but continued to happen even when people no longer believed in witches, that he started to work on *The Crucible*. In more recent years, Miller has been criticized for not fully acknowledging that he relied so heavily on Starkey's book, though this is perhaps a little unfair as he did admit that it gave him everything he needed, meaning that the week he spent in the archives was solely to pick up the type of language used during the trials. Bearing all this in mind, it is not a stretch to think Marilyn read this book since it influenced Miller's play so heavily.

A selection of religious books on Marilyn's shelves will also have been influenced by Miller, as she officially converted to Judaism upon their marriage. Although their initial wedding was at the end of June 1956, it was followed up on July 1 with a Jewish ceremony. Marilyn owned books that instructed her on daily prayer, such as *Sephath Emeth (Speech of Truth): Order of Prayers for the Whole Year, Hebrew and English* and *The Form of Daily Prayers*. Her shelves also contained a book inscribed to her from Paula Strasberg on the day of her Jewish marriage ceremony called *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text*, which is the authoritative Hebrew and Aramaic text of the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible, including guidance on intonation and pronunciation. This would have been helpful for Marilyn, who was also learning Yiddish. In a 2010 letter, Rabbi Robert Goldberg, who officiated the Miller-Monroe marriage and Marilyn's subsequent conversion later that same year, wrote that aside from it being her husband's religion, she was drawn to Judaism's "ethical and prophetic ideals and its concept of close family life." Interestingly, her conversion to Judaism led to Egypt banning all her films—a ban that was lifted when the marriage ended, although Monroe still referred to herself as "a Jewish atheist."

A bit more shelf-snooping reveals that she also owned quite a few books by New York writers who were friends or contemporaries of Miller's, as well as writers who influenced him. It is possible she would have read these anyway, but again it's not unusual to read books written by friends of your husband/partner or books they recommend. We've already looked at Bernard Malamud, but she also owned copies of books by Grace Paley, Herschel Steinhardt, Louis Untermeyer, Norman Rosten, Oscar Williams, and Tennessee Williams, and she certainly knew Saul Bellow. She even owned Miller's *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944) in a Danish translation (*An Mands Ansigt*), a play described by Christopher Bigsby as being "infused with the moral malaise of the Depression era." Miller owned many copies of his work in translation, so I suspect this one got left behind with Marilyn when they divorced. However devoted Marilyn had been, it seems unlikely she would have bought Miller in Danish.

Then there are a couple of books that were gifted and inscribed to both: *The Decisive Moment* by Henri Cartier-Bresson and *The Vapor Trail* by Ivan Lawrence Becker, a book of poetic tributes to those slain in World War II. Perhaps there were more; who knows where books end up when a marriage falls apart and possessions are divided up. Miller's personal books were acquired by the New York Public Library in 2020, and at least one book there belonged to Marilyn, a 1951 edition of *An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen.

But just as important as Miller's influence on Monroe is Monroe's influence on Miller. She was someone he said he admired before he even knew her, saying, "I took her as a serious actress before I ever met her. I think she's an adroit comedienne, but I also think she might turn into the greatest tragic actress that can be imagined." Miller wrote a short story based on Monroe called "Please Don't Kill Anything," which recounts a couple by the sea watching fishermen hauling in their catch for the day. As the men sift through their nets for the best fish, they discard others on the sand, leaving them to die. The couple watch the fish flounder on the sand and wonder if any are still alive. The woman (who remains nameless but is called "puss" and "sweet" by her husband Sam) asks the fishermen if the fish will survive if they are thrown back into the sea. They answer yes. And so, at the woman's urging, Sam proceeds to throw over fifty fish back into the waves. The woman is recognizably Marilyn. The fishermen are "warmed by her beauty" and her eyes are "the color of the blue sea." On several occasions her innocence and naivety are mentioned: "With the swift surge of wonder that swept through her at any new sight." And "she looked at him like a little girl, with that naked wonder in her face, even though she was smiling in the way of a grown woman..." The character even has the same gesture as Marilyn—one that has often been captured in photographs—"she put her two hands up to her cheeks" when she laughed. The character also hates cruelty, and Sam says that once at their home he had to open a window to let a moth escape when ordinarily he would have swatted it: "His heart worshipped her fierce tenderness toward all that lived." This plea of "please don't kill anything" echoes one reason why the real-life Marilyn disliked reading authors like Hemingway. She told W. J. Weatherby that she hated Hemingway's masculine heroes: "Those big tough guys are so sick. They aren't even all that tough! They're afraid of kindness and gentleness and beauty. They always want to kill something to prove themselves!" She hated the needless cruelty, just as the woman in Miller's story wanted to undo the casual cruelty of the fishermen. Yet in the story, Sam worries that behind his wife's aversion to death is a hope that if she saves all these creatures, she can somehow save herself. He wanted her to understand that if the moth or the fish died, she would not die too. It's an oddly poignant story written in 1960, but of course we read it now with the privilege of hindsight and time. For all the ways in which Marilyn may have influenced the story, the fear she had of trying to save herself makes perfect sense.

Another piece written to, and for, Marilyn was *The Misfits*, which began life as a short story written in 1957 and turned into a script for a film that started shooting in 1960. Miller regarded the movie as a present to Monroe and an opportunity for her to showcase her serious acting credentials playing Roslyn. What happened on the set is well documented, as the marriage fully collapsed, Miller struggled with rewrites, and Marilyn cast a critical eye over her husband, who she felt was out of his depth in her industry. Even before shooting had finished, she told photographer David Conover that she could no longer stand Miller and that "it was meant to be our movie. But he lied, he lied. All he wanted was to use me to regain his prestige. I'll never forgive him, never." Marilyn showed rare anger when she spoke about this film, feeling that her name was being used to raise the finances, and that Miller had somehow, irrevocably, let her down. "He could have

written me anything, and he comes up with this. If that's what he thinks of me, well, then, I'm not for him and he's not for me." And for good measure, she also wanted to kick the director, John Huston, in the balls.

If Marilyn found *The Misfits* somewhat disappointing, it is impossible to imagine how she would have felt about Miller's play *After the Fall*, which he seemingly wrote as a response to her death. It premiered on Broadway at the ANTA Washington Square Theatre, on January 23, 1964. It ran for 208 performances and is generally regarded as one of the most controversial plays of Miller's career. It was also one of his most commercially successful. The plot is experimental, nonlinear, with much of the dialogue and action somewhat stream of consciousness, or certainly free association. The action onstage represents the main character Quentin's psyche, and various people from his past and present come and go. There are four main female characters: his mother, his first wife (divorced), his second wife (a suicide), and his present love interest, with whom he is struggling to connect. As Quentin grapples with the early stages of this new love, his past relationships haunt him as he considers all the ways in which he has failed to connect with women. The themes covered are cruelty in marriage, McCarthyism, the uses and abuses of celebrity, addiction, alcoholism, and suicide attempts. Despite Miller's somewhat disingenuous denial that this play was not autobiographical, the second wife, Maggie, is widely believed to be based on Marilyn. Of course, when autobiography has been filtered through a creative process we cannot read it transparently, but nevertheless, it is naïve to ignore when a writer draws on facts from their own life. For example, in the stage production Maggie has a shock of peroxide hair, moves with a wiggly walk, and talks in a breathy voice. Her character is damaged beyond repair by her traumatic childhood, and she takes too many pills with too much alcohol. If this isn't enough "free association," Maggie's opening line in the play is "Is this the bus stop?"

Maggie is portrayed as a needy mess. She is a famous singer dealing with the corrosive nature of celebrity. At first Quentin takes a paternal attitude toward her: "You're very beautiful, Maggie. And I wish you knew how to take care of yourself." But the most disturbing exchange in the play occurs when Maggie exclaims, "I'm a joke to most people." In an aside, Quentin, speaking to himself, says, "Fraud! From the first five minutes!... Because! I should have agreed she *was* a joke, a beautiful piece, trying to take herself seriously!" Maggie then appears to suffer some sort of opaque suicide, swallowing too many barbiturates with alcohol as Quentin passively watches her, listening to the death rattle of her breathing as she slips away.

Marilyn's friends who saw the production were horrified and disturbed. Another theatergoer, Jackie Kennedy, stopped inviting Arthur Miller to any of her dinners as she saw the play as a huge betrayal of Marilyn. James Baldwin was appalled. In a 1964 interview he gave to *Playbill* he said, "If we were living in a civilization with any sense of proportion, a non-writer such as Arthur Miller could never achieve any eminence. It's not Arthur Miller's fault that we think he's an artist. He's watered-down Clifford Odets... *After the Fall* is the only play I ever walked out on. Anybody who could read it and not burn it obviously cannot be taken seriously as a theatre person." He encouraged Ava Gardner to join him in boycotting the play and even toyed with setting up picket lines.

Norman Mailer didn't like the play either, though he really didn't like much of Miller's work, or indeed Miller himself, calling him "ambitious, limited, and small-minded." (In turn Miller called Mailer Monroe "in drag, acting out his own Hollywood fantasies of fame and sex unlimited and power.")

Many reviews were scathing: "a three and one half hour breach of taste," "almost three hours of guilt, confession, and self-justification," "a three hour monolog of self-justification, with interruptions and conjurations, by a guilt-ridden man who has bad luck with women," and a play "that is never as moving or profound as it wants to be." Others, believing the production to be heavily autobiographical, felt uncomfortable with the way Miller had written himself to be the hero of his own play, with Maggie at one point uttering the words, "I would do anything for you, Quentin. You're like a god." But the general discomfort lay in the obvious portrayal of Marilyn onstage, exposing elements of her private life. In a 1966 interview with *The Paris Review*, Miller failed to address his own culpability but hit out at those who were disgusted by the play: "The ironic thing to me was that I heard cries of indignation from various people who had in the lifetime of Marilyn Monroe either exploited her unmercifully, in a way that would have subjected them to peonage laws, or mocked her viciously, or refused to take any of her pretensions seriously. So consequently, it was impossible to credit their sincerity." Having previously stated that the play was not about Marilyn, it's an odd line of defense to take.

For the sake of balance though, not all reviewers hated the play. Some praised Barbara Loden, who played Maggie, as "stunning" and "magnificent" and "an astonishing reminder of the late Marilyn Monroe." The poet Anne Sexton believed that Miller had tapped into something fundamental about suicide. She had seen big spreads about *After the Fall* in *Life* and *The Saturday Evening Post* and wrote to a friend, "Miller's play really gets me... the suicide stuff. etc. It is *too* confessional... but me, I likes confession." She approves of the suicide method Miller includes because she had been fooling with it herself (indeed, Sexton had several abortive suicide attempts with pills and alcohol). Ultimately, she felt that an overdose death "kicks time in the face" and she really wanted to kick time in the face.

After the Fall is named in reference to Albert Camus's philosophical novel *The Fall*, which was published in 1956. The book is a series of monologues from the main character Jean-Baptiste Clamence as he reflects on his life to a stranger. The main themes are innocence, imprisonment, non-existence, and truth. Marilyn owned a copy of the novel. One powerful passage summing up the difficulty of existence bears similarity to certain things Marilyn said throughout her life: "The true horror of existence is not the fear of death, but the fear of life. It is the fear of waking up each day to face the same struggles, the same disappointments, the same pain. It is the fear that nothing will ever change, that you are trapped in a cycle of suffering that you cannot escape." In many ways this is exactly what happened. Miller committed Maggie/Marilyn and her pain to the page, doomed textually to die over and over again, her death throes exposed for all to see.

There are many parallels between Miller's play and Camus's novel, which specifically deal with suicide, guilt, and the aftermath. In the first monologue Clamence, who is a defense lawyer, is walking across a bridge in Paris believing himself to be a highly moral

character who defends the poor and disenfranchised. As he crosses the Pont Royal, he sees a woman dressed all in black, leaning over the edge of the bridge. Although he thinks it a little odd, he carries on his way, only after some fifty yards, he suddenly hears a body hitting the water. He knows exactly what has happened. And then he hears the cries as the body struggles downstream. He does nothing. He goes home and tells no one. We see of course the parallels here with Miller's play when Maggie overdoses and Quentin stands merely watching and listening to her death throes, taking no action to help her. In Camus's novel this event creates a whole existential crisis when Clamence realizes he is a hypocrite and much of his goodness and morality is, in fact, performative. The rest of the novel follows Clamence as he deals with this crisis. But the interesting part, when we think about Marilyn's literary influence on Miller (who, after all, is writing a play influenced by Camus's novel), appears at the end of the book, which revisits the original suicide on the bridge. Clamence explains the complex impact this suicide had on his life: "O young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us!" The protagonist regrets not doing anything to save the woman and appears to understand that something of himself was destroyed along with her. Yet being offered another chance to save her is equally as problematic: "A second time, eh, what a risky suggestion!... But let's not worry! It's too late now. It'll always be too late. Fortunately!" Suicide is a messy business for those left behind.

From Miller's point of view, perhaps by writing this play he was trying to exorcise the pain he took from their broken marriage and Marilyn's death. There was a time when they were deeply in love and had hopes for their future. He felt he had tried to protect Marilyn and keep her safe, he looked after her, saved her life after failed suicide attempts, but ultimately, he believed that he failed to save her from herself. Did Arthur Miller have complicated feelings about Monroe's death? Maybe, but that is not really our business. Did he have the right to use Marilyn's suffering for creative and literary purposes? Evidently, he felt he did, and *After the Fall* is one example of him doing just that.

On April 12, 1964, the journalist David Lester in the *Los Angeles Times* published a piece called "True Marilyn?" This was his response to Miller's play, which Lester felt to be an unkind portrait both of Marilyn and what her marriage meant to her. He explained that the interview in the article had actually been conducted in 1957 but subsequently suppressed by her publicity advisors because what she said did not accord with the "national sex symbol" image they were building up. Marilyn, curled up on the sofa wearing no makeup, chatted to Lester about her previous negative assumptions toward marriage and her current astonishment that it was possible to be so happy. She spoke about her and Miller's quiet married life together, full of warmth and tenderness, how she made breakfast for her husband every morning, and looked forward to the weekends when she could spend time with his children. "All my life I have been alone. Now, for the first time, the really first time, I feel I'm not alone anymore. For the first time I have a feeling of being sheltered. It's as if I have come in out of the cold." She spoke about how feeling secure in her private life helped enormously in her professional life and how much of the terror she experienced before filming scenes had eased, or at least she no longer "threw up or trembled." As Marilyn showed Lester out of her New York apartment, they

both spotted Miller through an open door on the phone in his study. Marilyn smiled at him, turned to Lester, and said, "I'm mad about him." The article ends with Lester noting these were the last words Marilyn said to him. His desire was to give Marilyn her own voice on the matter.

After the Fall may have been Miller's attempt to process Marilyn's death, but it is important to place his response in a wider cultural context. When Marilyn died, reporters from *The New York Times* asked several people for comments. Sophia Loren broke down in tears. Laurence Olivier said she was "the complete victim of ballyhoo and sensation." French artist and poet Jean Cocteau replied, "Marilyn Monroe's tragic death should serve as a terrible lesson to all those whose chief occupation consists of spying on and tormenting film stars. Some of these reporters even spied on her from helicopters hovering over her house. That is scandalous."

Marilyn's first husband, Jim Dougherty, said quietly, "I'm sorry." Joe DiMaggio was unavailable. And when Arthur Miller was asked if he had any comment he said, "I don't, really."

He did, however, begin commenting in private, echoing some of the sentiments Cocteau had stated. In an essay that he began on August 8, 1962, and continued to work on over the years, he addresses a "you" that appears to be a mix of media and those in Hollywood who exploited Marilyn. Miller justified not attending her funeral and struck out, "She was destroyed by many things and some of those things are you. And some of those things are destroying you. Destroying you now. Now as you stand there weeping and gawking, glad that it is not you going into the earth, glad that it is this lovely girl who you at last killed."

If stories are to be believed, it was twenty years before he could cry over Marilyn's death. In 2002, when asked if he had kept anything from their time together, he said only four or five letters. (Marilyn kept all of his, tied in a bundle and found in her house.) But he also pointed to his garage and said "her bicycle. It's been hanging up in there for 40 years." He also took from their marriage literary influence, for good or ill, depending on how you interpret it.

Why is Marilyn's reading ability doubted?



The power of the phrase "Marilyn Monroe reading" lies in its application to Monroe and in our assumption that she wouldn't know how.

—Oline Eaton

In 2014, scholar Oline Eaton awoke one morning to see a photograph of Marilyn had been posted on social media with the caption “Marilyn Monroe reading.” Although she had seen this caption many times before, on this particular morning the words struck her, and infuriated her because she realized that there was something insulting about them. When she entered the phrase *Marilyn Monroe reading* into Google, it threw up over fifteen million hits. When she changed the name to another celebrity, such as Laurence Olivier or Elizabeth Taylor, it lost its power. Eaton realized this was because there is an assumption that Monroe did not/could not read, that her photographs were staged and fodder for “nerd-drool.” The subtext was that there was something surprising about Monroe reading: “‘marilyn monroe reading’ implies that there is something shocking within the fact that marilyn monroe is reading. you wouldn’t label a photograph ‘marilyn monroe posing’ or ‘marilyn monroe strutting’ because those descriptors would be unnecessary. strutting and posing are the things marilyn monroe is expected to do. it is still, apparently, seen as unlikely that she would read.”

Eaton makes a powerful argument for the subversive messages a seemingly straightforward caption can imply. There is not only the cultural assumption that Marilyn faked her reading, or used her books as props, but equally that there was something humorous about a woman like Marilyn reading—all a bit of a joke. To understand where these assumptions come from involves wandering away from Marilyn’s bookshelves for a little while, although some of her books will accompany this journey. Focus needs to shift to ask some wider, bigger questions about the historical moments that created the social environment in which a beautiful woman reading a book cannot simply be taken at face value. There are four main areas to explore, and Marilyn’s bookshelves reflect all of them. They are the role of the Hollywood studio system, the politics of (patriarchal) representation, the history of the “dumb blonde,” and the voices of resistance.

How we know and understand a star or celebrity of Marilyn’s magnitude is largely down to the role of the Hollywood studio system that dominated the industry from the late 1920s until it lost its potency in the mid-1950s. “Marilyn Monroe” was a product of this system, which would take promising stars and shape, mold, and control every aspect of their lives both on- and off-screen. The studio system was in effect a business model that allowed a continuous stream of films because the studios owned every aspect of creating them—the production, the distribution, the publicity, the stars, and the exhibition, with the bigger studios, such as Paramount, even owning the theaters where their films were screened. The stars were kept under control by long-term contracts, of up to seven years, during which time they could not film for any other company unless agreed with by the studio. These contracts also tended to be extended indefinitely without the actor’s say, a move that would eventually be challenged in 1948. Actors had

little autonomy in the films they starred in and pretty much no creative input. This was largely down to the work studios had put into carefully crafting personas for their stars, which is why they so often played the same roles. It's hard to imagine Clark Gable being anything other than the dominant, brooding male hero.

Marilyn had read about the studio system through the biographies of actors she admired, such as Mae West, but as a young woman who had worked hard to get where she was, it was difficult to stand up to the studios when they began to mold her in a certain way. And Marilyn was changed in some fundamental ways. For starters, they changed her name from Norma Jeane Mortensen to Marilyn Monroe, quite a shift of identity to take something so significant as a name. Then they changed her appearance, dyeing her hair platinum blond, inserting a bovine chin implant to change the shape of her jawline, carrying out dental work, and according to gossip, slightly shaving the width of her nose. She was sent to singing, dancing, and acting lessons, and cast in roles that presented her as either a smoldering "blonde bombshell" (*Niagara*) or a carefree, comedic, slightly stupid but innocent woman out to get her man (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *How to Marry a Millionaire*). The fact that the studios, and indeed the industry, was dominated by men often resulted in the bureaucratization of the male gaze. We saw heterosexual male fantasies projected onto the screen, whether that was traditional heroic masculinity or cultural tropes about women. This was not altered by the restrictions of the Hays Code (1934–1968), which had been implemented to try and control the moral standards of film and make sure they upheld good, American values. For actors like Marilyn, the code severely restricted the ways in which women could be depicted since the rules were essentially that films should reinforce the accepted gender roles of the period. The result was that these rules reduced narrative complexity since any production had to clearly have good versus bad with no ambiguity. A villain could never be seen to gain any advantage or get away with anything. This made any nuanced roles rare for women, as the code enforced limitations on female agency. Since women were regarded as inferior to men, they were rarely depicted gaining control over their lives or decisions, resulting in more of a focus on women's bodies than their stories. And under such strict moral codes, the scholar Jolanta Szymkowska-Bartyzel noted that "Marilyn's type of child-woman was particularly well suited to tickle a sense of indecency without going beyond moral boundaries. Monroe in these roles is a pornography of the imagination, made sparkling by the efficient technology. The audience liked it, the audience needed it: Marilyn's fancy eroticism was elegant, amusingly exciting, and conflict-free." In other words, titillating, but not violating any imposed boundaries.

The studios became sort of powerhouses exerting rigid control over their films, the subject matter, and the lives of their "contract stars." They coordinated with the media to get the best possible press for their actors and to ensure they always stayed in the limelight. In a more sinister move, many Hollywood actors reported that if they stepped out of line, the studios would brief the press against them until they started behaving how they were *told* to behave. And this behavior always had to uphold the actor's studio-created persona and the on-brand values of the studio itself.

For Marilyn, several things collided to embed her created persona so rigidly in our

cultural imagination that it has taken some time to unravel and expose just how destructive this was for her day-to-day life. Many of the images that come to mind when we think of Marilyn are not Marilyn herself but rather studio constructions: the breathy voice; the childlike wonder; the helplessness; the giggly, hapless, carefree “blonde.” This is the persona that was offered to the media, and these were the roles Marilyn was given to play (and if you doubt this, think about the roles she played when she broke free of the studio). But here’s the twist: Marilyn herself, almost certainly unwittingly, consolidated the image of this persona by being so very good at playing it. When Natasha Lytess and Lee Strasberg introduced her to “the Method,” Strasberg encouraged her not just to pretend to be these characters but to inhabit them, to become them. What we see on-screen is just how successfully Marilyn pulled this off, to the extent that when she was off-screen no one thought she could possibly be any different. Her acting, which appeared so effortless as to look like she was being herself, was in fact the result of hard work, study, and drawing on the emotional landscape of her past. We have already looked at all those acting books on her shelves, such as Chekhov and Stanislavski. She took her acting seriously and wanted to be the best she could. And when she became the best, it seemed nobody believed she was another kind of person. When this persona was cemented by the studios and the media, Marilyn was left trapped with this creation she had played a part in making. Her talent was not taken seriously, and neither was she. Even when other actors saw her reading on set, they felt it was for show. While filming *Some Like It Hot* she was reading *Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine. While filming her small role in *The Fireball* she was reading *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*. While filming *Love Nest* she was reading *Swann’s Way* by Marcel Proust. Talk-show host Jack Paar observed this and called it Marilyn’s “act,” saying, “I fear that beneath the façade of Marilyn there was only a frightened waitress in a diner.”

Paar, with all his misogyny and classism, was right to identify a facade but he was deeply wrong about what was behind it. Even a cursory comparison between the Marilyn persona and the real-life Marilyn shows just how powerful the facade was in throwing people off what really existed beneath:

REASONABLE

Carefree about women’s rights,
civil rights, humanitarian
rights
Happily and glibly
Glibly does blouses and
slacks, no makeup
Sharp wit and intelligence
Wasation in the female role
Relaxed and resourceful,
usually alone
Modest with the family things

One aspect of Marilyn’s appearance that appeared to consolidate all the myths of her

stereotype was her hair color. Culturally, there was something about blond hair that suggested not only were such women more attractive to men (think Jean Harlow in *Bombshell* [1933]), but that they were inclined to have more fun, relied on their looks to get by, and were less intelligent. These supposed characteristics only applied to women though, not men. It's also worth noting that most women who were classed as "dumb blondes" were not naturally blond at all, Marilyn included. The sources for where these ideas originated are fascinating, ranging from ancient Rome, where women who lightened their hair were seen to be indicating their sexual availability and associated with prostitution; medieval Europe, where peasants who worked outside had lighter hair and because they were peasants were seen to be less intelligent; and a play performed in France in 1775 called *Les Curiosités de la Foire*, a satire about a blond courtesan named Rosalie Duthé, who would pause a long time before speaking, so appearing not only stupid but giving birth to the expression "dumb blonde."

Whatever the history of the stereotype, it has stuck and remains prevalent today, which is why when Oline Eaton saw the caption "Marilyn Monroe reading" she knew there was a subtext. Because of course someone like Marilyn Monroe would never be reading. And even worse, it seemed culturally very few wanted her to read or even take herself seriously. Eve Arnold noted that when she saw *The Misfits*, audiences laughed at Marilyn's serious acting. "It was evident that the audience did not want the new Marilyn—the actress. They did not want her serious. They wanted her to make them laugh, they wanted the sexpot, the comedienne." Arnold understood the tension this created, with audiences wanting the persona Marilyn had taken a hand in creating, while Marilyn wanted to break free from this to develop and grow.

Barbara Baxley, who studied at the Actors Studio alongside Marilyn, admitted that she did not take Monroe seriously at all when she first arrived. Having fallen for the media persona, she assumed Marilyn off-screen would be the same as Marilyn on-screen. Yet it didn't take long for her to realize how far off the mark she was. Nevertheless, there was a general sense within the acting studio that as soon as Marilyn had to read and act serious roles she would fail. They did not know that during this time Marilyn was reading Dostoyevsky, Tennessee Williams, and James Joyce. Baxley felt that the need to belittle Marilyn came from a place of envy and a desire for scandal, for to admit Marilyn was intelligent, beautiful, and talented "[is] not a juicy story, so we peck at her corpse and take a piece of skin here, a piece of skin there and put together an image, a portrait that satisfies our need to feel better about our own lives. Our own lives in which we are not beautiful and magical and fragile and very, very serious about becoming better."

This notion of doubting Marilyn, of wanting her to be lesser than she was, emerged repeatedly in the media. When she was interviewed in London, a journalist asked what her favorite English food was, and she couldn't recall the name so she turned to Arthur Miller and said, "Darling, what was that stuff Dickens wrote about?" It was established that she liked a type of fish called whitebait. But as Michelle Morgan noted in her book covering this period, one reporter from the *Daily Sketch* couldn't resist writing, "She tossed the writer's name off as if she read books every day."

By the time Marilyn was in London filming *The Prince and the Showgirl* she had

already started making a serious effort to break free from the studio's control. In 1955, much to the astonishment of Twentieth Century-Fox, Marilyn walked out of her contract and moved to New York. It took negotiations to get her back to the West Coast, including concessions such as a list of directors approved by Marilyn for future films. The first project she took under this increased creative input was *Bus Stop*, directed by Joshua Logan. At first Logan, like many others, fell for the "dumb blonde" persona: "Marilyn had always been the butt of jokes. It seemed an accepted conclusion that she was a beautifully formed but stupid blonde. That was her fixed and nailed-down professional label." He finished filming *Bus Stop* believing Marilyn to be one of the greatest talents of all time.

There are, however, alternative readings of some of her seemingly most sexist films. In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, for example, her character Lorelei Lee appears to be childlike and hapless, but in fact is conniving in her dealings with men. On the one hand, this challenges the myth of the stupid, helpless woman, but it does fall prey to the stereotype of the gold digger. Monroe injected a depth and nuance into the role if you choose to see it, and, in many ways, subverted her dumb blonde stereotype by playing along with it (Lorelei: "I can be smart when it's important. But most men don't like it."). As film critic and author Jonathan Rosenbaum has noted, "Like the hard-nosed Lorelei Lee—who was perfectly capable of acting like a smart grown-up when it came to her friendship with Dorothy (Jane Russell)—Monroe had discovered early on that her greatest power rested in her capacity to look and sound innocent, hapless, and helpless." This is a dangerous tactic though, because one outcome—which is what appeared to happen to Marilyn—is that the "dumb blonde" stereotype was taken at face value and became her accepted persona. Given this tension, it is not surprising she took action against it.

Marilyn's rebellion was built on earlier dissent in Hollywood. Over the decades actors had raised voices of resistance to loosen the iron grip studios had on them, some more successfully than others. The most significant case occurred in 1943, when Olivia de Havilland sued Warner Bros. over the legality of their seven-year contracts. After finally becoming tired of playing roles she had no interest in playing, she sued the studio for indefinitely extending her contract to cover periods of nonwork. She won. This opened the door for further challenges, and in 1948 the US government sued Paramount Pictures for holding an unfair monopoly in the industry. They also won and Paramount was forced to sell the theaters they had used to show their films. The power of the studios began to fragment. Actors began to set up their own independent production companies, and Marilyn was one of the first women to do this, in an otherwise male-dominated industry. Alongside Milton H. Greene, Monroe established MMP to gain more autonomy over her life and career. This was Monroe's attempt at dispelling the silly-blonde persona and showing that she was in fact capable of so much more. She read books and plays for inspiration and spent time looking for possible projects to film, considering writers as diverse as Willa Cather and Shakespeare.

There are other social reasons to explain why Marilyn's reading ability was not taken seriously. Her fractured childhood and sporadic education resulted in her failing to graduate from high school. Often, erroneously, a lack of formal educational achievements

can be equated with a lack of intelligence, but this seems a flimsy reason to doubt someone's ability to read; there are lots of highly intelligent people who were denied a full education, and there are lots of not very intelligent people who were lucky enough to spend years in college. As we have seen, Marlon Brando had a very similar education history to Marilyn, and no one doubted his reading abilities.

Returning to Marilyn's bookshelves we see art, literature, psychology, religion, philosophy, science, poetry. Despite these hundreds of volumes, we now know why Marilyn's reading ability is doubted—a poisonous cocktail of patriarchy, industry decisions, cultural stereotypes, social expectations, Marilyn's unwitting complicity, being too convincing in her roles, and quite simply not having enough time to reestablish herself.

Marilyn Monroe: avid reader, gifted actor, and astute businesswoman fighting to control her own destiny is not yet Marilyn's legacy, though it should be.

Did Marilyn suffer from impostor syndrome?



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If someone tells you that you are stupid and dumb enough times, chances are you will start to believe it. If you are someone with no stable and loving family to fall back on, or no partner who believes in you, or no close friends who are in your corner, your self-worth relies entirely on the strength of your self-belief. This can be difficult to sustain, and it is understandable that some form of self-doubt would begin to creep in. Why is impostor syndrome an important point to consider when thinking about the literary life of Marilyn Monroe? The answer is that Marilyn's reading formed a concerted effort to overcome any inadequacies she perceived in herself. She strove for progressive self-betterment with an engaged and inquisitive mind. But to fully understand the literary life of Marilyn Monroe, we need to understand why she felt those inadequacies.

Marilyn had no supportive parents to tell her how well she was doing. One husband, Joe DiMaggio, interfered with, and tried to control, her career. Marilyn's closest friends usually doubled as employees. In other words, she often paid those she was closest to. If anyone was going to believe in and champion Marilyn Monroe, it was going to have to be herself, and she often did a pretty good job of this. Coming from the background that she did, she took on and worked her way up through the Hollywood studio system to become one of the most famous women in the world. Yet for much of the time she was terrified. Dorothy Parker recognized and empathized with this fear. Ayn Rand noted how incredible it was that Marilyn got as far as she did, faced with the attitudes of the time: "A spectacularly successful star, whose employers kept repeating: 'Remember, you're not a star,' in a determined effort, apparently, not to let her discover her own importance. A brilliantly talented actress, who was told by the alleged authorities, by Hollywood, by the press, that she could not act." Today, this would be referred to as "impostorization," the idea that workplaces or institutions have cultures designed to make employees question their own competence or sense of belonging. It could also be seen as a form of gaslighting, making someone perpetually doubt themselves.

Even when Marilyn found someone—Arthur Miller—who she thought truly believed in her, this too fell apart. Just months after their marriage Miller and Monroe traveled to England. One day looking for her film script, she happened upon his diary, which had been left open in the sitting room of their English house. Whether it was left there deliberately or by accident is unknown. Marilyn saw that the entry was about her, and although she never exactly said what she had read and Miller never really spoke of this (his notebook is not available), she did say it indicated that he was in some way disappointed with and doubted their marriage. He felt that she wasn't as intelligent as he had previously thought, and—much to Marilyn's horror—he wrote that in some ways he pitied her. The Strasbergs and Marilyn's half sister Berniece said Marilyn told them Miller had thought she was some kind of angel but now he guessed he was wrong, and even worse, he was frequently embarrassed by her in front of his intellectual circle. In turn she

regarded many of his friends with some resentment, claiming they treated her like “a dull little sex object with no brains and talked to me like a high school principal with a backward student.” People who knew Marilyn felt that she never fully recovered from reading Miller’s words. What she did write in her diary were some of the saddest words:

I guess I have always been
deeply terrified at to really be someone’s
wife
since I know from life
one cannot love another,
Ever, really.

So, it is easy to establish plenty of examples where other people thought Marilyn was *less than*, and it would be foolish to think this did not have an impact on her feelings of self-worth. One of her biggest fears was being regarded as a joke, but how devastating it must have been to work so hard, to read so hard, to educate herself and learn, to have a wonderful personal library only for people to claim you never read any of it. But whether this amounted to impostor syndrome requires a little more analysis, both of the condition and what Marilyn had to say.

The name alone is loaded: *impostor* implying some sort of deceit, a charlatan or a fraud, and *syndrome* implying a disorder or ailment. But in fact, what the term refers to is a psychological condition in which a person suffers from feelings of self-doubt or fraudulence. They doubt their skills and talents, even when faced with evidence of their success. Their accomplishments feel empty because they fear they will be exposed as a fake, as someone who does not deserve their luck or success. This condition is not pathologized, it does not appear in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and it is not a recognized psychiatric disorder, but people who suffer from it have a higher chance of anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, low self-esteem, neuroticism, and perfectionism. If you truly believe you are not good enough, you will screw yourself up trying to prove that you are. Impostor syndrome is generally regarded as being a product of a person’s childhood or parenting (as Marilyn wrote in her diary, “Everyone’s childhood plays itself out”), but it is also linked to personality traits such as atychiphobia (fear of failure) and any existing mental health conditions. The overall impact is a sense of not belonging.

So far, this describes Marilyn. She lived with generalized terror and anxiety. She suffered terribly from insomnia. She often felt out of place. She was known to be a perfectionist, sometimes demanding take after take when even the director was perfectly happy. Diary notes that exist give us Marilyn’s voice. Written in a small black notebook with the gilded word RECORD on the cover, she reflects on her fear and panic. On page 135, black-edged and written in pencil, Marilyn worries that if she is given new lines, she won’t be able to learn them or will make mistakes. Then this spirals: “People will either think I’m no good or laugh or belittle me or think I can’t act.” She tries to reason with herself but the fear she will somehow be “found out” is just too strong: “Trying to build

myself up with the fact that I have done things right that were even good and have had moments that were excellent but the bad is heavier to carry around and feel have no confidence.”

Yet impostor syndrome is usually classed as an unfounded belief of low self-worth. Surely Marilyn regarding herself as a joke and not good enough is not remotely unfounded. Everybody told her this—her studio, her husband, the press. Consequently, she tried so very hard. Truman Capote noted that one of Marilyn’s overriding features was her desire to try and please everyone. Max Lerner of the *Los Angeles Times* was one of the few journalists who seemed to understand what Marilyn was experiencing. In 1960, reflecting upon the treatment she had received, he wrote, “She has shown an animal faith in her own life-force, and a long-range sense of purpose which no one and nothing have been able to deflect.” But more than this, Lerner felt Marilyn had something that stood out from the hundreds of other young women who had tried to make it in Hollywood, a holistic approach to what she was trying to achieve, which made her different: “The impressive thing is that this single-purposed drive towards stardom and fame and acclaim co-exists with a tremulous sensitivity, a hoydenish playfulness, an authentic talent, and an evidently genuine pull towards books and ideas and writers.”

Often because Marilyn appeared sweet and genuinely kind, her grit and self-determination were underestimated. And like any talented woman who sometimes refuses to toe the line, she was accused of being “difficult.” In Marilyn’s case, she did cause huge disruptions on set. She was often late. Not because she wasn’t ready but because she *felt* she wasn’t ready. She would be sick with stage fright, or think her hair and makeup were not perfect, or that she couldn’t remember her lines. All this self-agonizing left the rest of the cast and crew waiting around for hours, their goodwill draining away. Jack Lemmon, who starred alongside Marilyn in *Some Like It Hot*, understood that this behavior was not malicious or intentional or, quoting him, “temperamental.” It sprang from Marilyn’s self-doubt and fear that she was not good enough.

This lack of confidence and social anxiety is reflected by some of the books on Marilyn’s shelves. For example, not only did she have lots of D. H. Lawrence, but she had a book guiding her on how to read him. Her shelves contained books on correct etiquette when entertaining (*How to Do It, or, The Lively Art of Entertaining* by Elsa Maxwell) and instructional books covering many areas of life, ranging from gardening and raising Siamese cats to keeping turtles. She was always worried about doing something wrong, saying something wrong, and becoming an even greater object of ridicule than she already was. W. J. Weatherby noticed this hesitation and lack of confidence when Marilyn discussed her reading. She was ashamed to admit some books were beyond her, and she was so used to not being taken seriously that when she spoke about playing Cordelia opposite Michael Chekhov’s King Lear in her acting class, she waited for Weatherby to scoff at her. When he didn’t, she shyly admitted that she wanted to perform more Shakespeare: “She suddenly raced on, her interest in the subject overcoming her embarrassment.” George Sanders, who starred with Marilyn in *All About Eve*, recalled her reading poetry on set and found her conversation had unexpected depths: “She showed an interest in intellectual subjects which was, to say the least, disconcerting.” But mostly

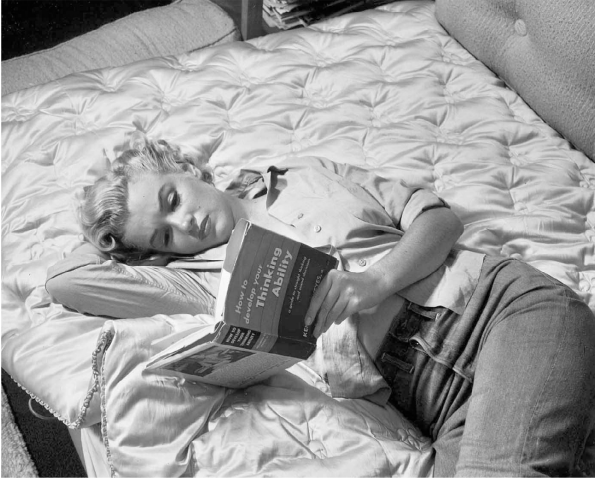
he noticed that she was very unsure of herself: “She was somebody in a play not yet written.”

But there was a feeling that whatever Marilyn did, it would never have been enough. She read *The Sleeping Prince* by Terence Rattigan, bought the film rights, formed her own production company to make the film, and engaged Laurence Olivier as her costar, and still people on set sniggered about her belief that she could act opposite one of the British greats of stage and screen. Olivier himself, tired of her using the Method to get into character, told her to “just look sexy,” a comment that infuriated her so much she began to be obstructive on set. The more she sensed people laughing at her, the more paralyzed she became. Her diary notes list her problems and fears: “nervousness, humanness, blunders, mistakes, and my own thoughts.” It didn’t matter that when the rushes of the film were viewed, Marilyn acted everyone off the screen (the consensus being amazement since she didn’t appear to be *doing* anything in front of the camera). It didn’t occur to anyone that she actually knew what she was doing.

Some of this came down to snobbery, but some of it was also a result of what Bosley Crowther in *The New York Times* believed to be a clash of fantasy versus reality: “She was more a symbol than an artist.” She was fashioned into this distinctive female symbol that was transmitted around the world, and this symbol was so strong that it overcame her artistry, her intelligence. “Marilyn Monroe,” he wrote, “was not generally regarded as an artist submerged in her art.” Yet if this was the popular view, it wasn’t what writers saw in her. Somerset Maugham was delighted at the news that she was to play the part of Sadie Thompson in an adaptation of his short story “Rain” for television. This movie never happened because Lee Strasberg wanted to direct but NBC wouldn’t let him, so, depending on who you believe, he either instructed Marilyn not to take the role or she didn’t want to take it without him. Saul Bellow was bowled over when he met her. “I have yet to see anything in Marilyn that isn’t genuine,” he wrote. “Surrounded by thousands she conducts herself like a philosopher.” The poet Norman Rosten, who became close to Marilyn, noticed that she needed constant proof she was adored because it denied her inner dread of being unwanted. And many writers who featured on Marilyn’s bookshelves—Garson Kanin, Alvah Bessie, and Lucy Freeman—were so taken with her that they went on to write books about her, or featuring characters based on her, after her death.

So, to come full circle, if you are told enough times that you are stupid, then it is always going to be a battle to resist that judgment. It is a testament to Marilyn’s strength that she fought against this for so long: “I ask myself what I am afraid of. I know I have talent. I know I can act. Well, get on with it, Marilyn. I feel I still try to ingratiate myself with people, try to tell them what they want to hear. That’s fear, too. We should all start to live before we get too old. Fear is stupid. So are regrets.”

Did Marilyn use books as a form of self-help?



The simple answer to this question is yes. And like many things Marilyn did, she was slightly ahead of her time doing it. Although self-help books were becoming established in 1960s America, they were not the stalwart occupants of bookstores that we see today. But for people with any number of problems, there were a selection of books that offered tips for self-improvement. Marilyn's bookshelves were full of various types of books instructing on a variety of issues, ranging from notions of identity to diet, exercise, training the mind, hypnotism, how to stay young, how to stay healthy, and how to gain peace of mind.

It's not remotely surprising that Marilyn felt she needed such books given her worries about not being good enough and the elements of impostor syndrome she carried with her. But there are practical reasons, too, why self-help books are useful for actors. Generally, their purpose is to empower an individual, to improve lives by addressing specific problems, offering guidance and support. The aim is to increase self-belief, offer motivation and inspiration, and allow someone to reach their full potential. For actors, all these elements are essential. But self-help books can serve a professional purpose as well. By reading them actors can gain insight into human behavior and motivations. Understanding this feeds into, and helps improve, their ability to portray complex characters with emotional depth. For Marilyn, reading books that instructed her on how to do things, or even how to *be*, would equally offer some sort of clarity and focus on the human condition as a whole—something that was essential to carry out Stanislavski's Method.

There has always been some skepticism about self-help books, which can be summarized in one question: Do they really work, or are they just emptying people's bank accounts? The self-help books Marilyn owned appeared to fall into both categories. Many of her books focused on aspects of the body and mind that would have been crucial for acting. Although her regimens were somewhat sporadic—as author Elisa Jordan noted, “Marilyn's diet and exercise routines were all over the place”—she did engage in unusual activities for women in the 1950s and '60s, such as jogging in the back alleys of Beverly Hills, weightlifting, meditation, and yoga. It is the latter that we see reflected on Marilyn's bookshelf in the form of *Forever Young, Forever Healthy: Simplified Yoga for Modern Living* by Indra Devi (1953). This is one self-help book where the author certainly was her own best advocate since Devi lived until she was 102. Born Eugenie Peterson in Latvia, she traveled extensively in India, studying under various teachers, and became determined to bring hatha yoga to the West. In 1948 she opened a yoga studio on Sunset Boulevard (at a location that by the 1950s would become somewhat inappropriately a burger joint, Jack's on the Strip, home of the Big Jackburger). Here, wearing a sari, Devi taught yoga to some of the most famous names in Hollywood: Greta Garbo, Ava Gabor, Yul Brynner, Jennifer Jones, and possibly most spectacular of all,

Gloria Swanson. Swanson provided a blurb for *Forever Young, Forever Healthy*, writing, “In her book (Indra Devi) reveals her... splendid path to... well-being,” which is definitely one of those blurbs where you want to know what the ellipses are hiding. There is no evidence Marilyn ever met Devi or visited the yoga studio, but she was known to practice yoga, and Marilyn’s bookshelves also contained several travel-based books about India (*The Heart of India* by Alexander Campbell, and *My India, Jungle Lore*, and *Man-Eaters of India* by Jim Corbett). Devi’s book instructed not just how to practice yoga but shared her personal journey and showed how yoga poses link to the body’s endocrine system. Various sections of the book, along with photographic support, cover lessons on deep breathing, correct posture, relaxation, diet, fasting, and sound vibrations. Although this was one of the earliest forays into wellness, some felt that Devi’s success lay in her ability to present yoga as some sort of youth and beauty elixir in a town that valued both. Small wonder so many actors at the top of their game practiced it, Marilyn included.

This idea of relaxation as being crucial for health (and acting) was reflected in another self-help book on Marilyn’s shelf called *Relax and Live!* by Joseph A. Kennedy (1953), a man who was billed as “America’s leading authority on relaxation.” These techniques began as part of a feature for *Life* magazine in 1951. The article was so popular that it was expanded two years later into *Relax and Live!* The book, which has a hazardous-yellow cover, appears to use confrontational capitalization and underlining to warn readers, “How close to the DANGER POINT are you? Fatigue, Tension, Fear, Sleeplessness can burn you out before you know it—unless you take steps to... *Relax and Live!*” With a bold claim that the book can produce positive results in “less than 24 hours,” you can even take the questionnaire on the back to decide whether you are showing “danger signs.” At 184 pages, this book has possibly one of the best opening chapter titles in the history of self-help books: “How to Keep from Hurrying Yourself to Death.” This book, targeted at people from all walks of life, includes Kennedy discussing how he has tutored students who had spent fifteen years trying to relax and consistently failing. He claims this is because most people don’t realize that “relaxation is not something you *do*; it is something you *don’t* do.” Again, like Devi, with a focus on health and age (chapter: “Relax and Stay Young”), Kennedy explains how “many nervous people go through the entire day with a sort of chronic case of stage fright.” This does indeed sound like Marilyn, and one can only hope she got some respite by following Kennedy’s remedy for this, which includes, among other things, a complicated and somewhat mind-boggling series of swinging exercises.

Another equally eccentric book on Marilyn’s shelf was *Hypnotism Today* by Leslie LeCron and Jean Bordeaux (1947). Hypnotism has been used in America in one form or another since the mid to late 1800s and was regarded as a precursor to modern psychology. In fact, looking at its history, it becomes evident why Marilyn would have an interest, given it was used by Freud, used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder after both world wars and the Korean War (where, remember, Marilyn went to sing to the troops), and approved for medical use in America in 1958. *Hypnotism Today* begins with a claim that usually books about the subject are a hodgepodge of ignorance by charlatans, but that this one is different. It is grounded in an understanding of psychopathology, evoking

past memories, dream suggestion, and employing other hypnotherapy techniques. It's unfortunate that it opens with a racist sentence, "Since its earliest use by primitive people....," but in fact the rest of the book contains some important observations about health care that would resonate with Marilyn, who was a great advocate and patient of psychoanalysis. Divided into two parts, the first deals with hypnotism and suggestion, the second with hypnotherapy. LeCron and Bordeaux make some pertinent points about the state of health care back in the 1940s that sound startlingly contemporary. They observe that most general practitioners do not know what to do with "the neurotic" or how to treat psychological diseases. So, the general advice is "consult a psychiatrist," which they note, somewhat acerbically, "would be excellent advice if there were thirty or forty thousand psychiatrists." Instead, they feel that the future of treating any psychopathologies lay in using hypnotism along with psychology to produce hypnoanalysis, which if generally adopted would be able to provide treatment for all. It is fascinating to reflect on how Marilyn was informing herself in real time on the developments and conversations taking place to treat neurosis. We don't know if she ever tried hypnosis or hypnotherapy, though in recent years hypnotism has been used to regress people to past lives, many of whom claim to be Marilyn Monroe.

As well as hypnotism, Marilyn owned books that today would be categorized as using manifestation techniques—think about what you desire to make it happen. For example, *The Magic Word L-I-D-G-T-T-F-T-A-T-I-M* by Robert Collier (1940) was a classic of its kind written by a man who was regarded as an American spiritualist and writer of metaphysical books. Collier's background was in advertising, first as a copywriter, before starting his own company. He specialized in writing words that would persuade people through effective communication. This led to him creating a magazine called *Mind, Inc.*, drawing on religion and metaphysics, which included fiction. His bibliography shows him progressing from this magazine to books on topics such as how to make money at home in your spare time, to titles with increasingly spiritual tones such as *The God in You* and *The Secret Power*. The book that Marilyn owned, *The Magic Word*, focused on the idea that "like attracts like"—if you give out praise and kindness to the world, you will receive it back. Sometimes this can be spiritual, and sometimes, seemingly, there can be material rewards ("To the wives who may read this: You know your man. He can't fool you. But be just as honest as you can, praise him, send him out to work with a smile, with praise, and you'll wear sables—try it."). The magic word *L-I-D-G-T-T-F-T-A-T-I-M* contained in the book title refers to the mantra "Lord, I do give Thee thanks for the abundance that is mine." Repeating these words, claimed Collier, can be as effective as using a talisman. He talks about invisible power, the God in each of us, and the fact that we are like miniature suns operating in our own self-controlled solar systems: "If there is something lacking in your solar system, you have only to 'speak the word'—create the mental image, then hold to that image in serene faith until The God in You has filled it with those elements that make it visible to all." For someone like Marilyn, who lived with a daily sense of terror and fear of being disliked, this type of self-help book would certainly be attractive. Though there is a sense in which Collier perhaps does not acknowledge how power relations work, or even illness or disaster, since he claims that if

you become the victim of an undesirable external situation it is your fault for letting it into your solar system. You have total dominion, and the final say on what is allowed to enter is yours: “It is your own fault when you allow yourself to become the victim of personal impotence or of undesirable external situations. As Emerson put it—‘Nothing external to you has any power over you.’ You fear these negative seemings simply because you BELIEVE in them, when all the time it is only that BELIEF that gives them power and authority.” The book builds (via a series of anecdotes about various people who manifest paying their rent/gaining material wealth/starting a new business idea) until it reaches a startling crescendo of just how magnificent life can be if you allow yourself to be the leader of not only your own solar system but your New Mental Empire. “Hail! Mighty Emperor! Enter into and possess, rule and govern, your New Mental Empire! It is YOURS!” Goodness.

I am afraid I must crash back down to earth now to look at a slightly more practical, yet no less jaw-dropping, self-help book on Marilyn’s shelves called *The Failure of Success* by Esther Milner (1959). This book is unusual in that it openly decides on its audience and then addresses them exclusively, that audience being the middle class. Given when it was published, we can fairly assume it would be accurate to add *white* here. The preface questions why middle-class people seem so dissatisfied, and the first chapter offers this answer: because “we” subscribe to the touchstone fallacy of “our” time. This is the belief that high occupational and consumer status will result in happiness. It doesn’t, says Milner. And to even believe in such a fallacy makes us no better than “savages” and “primitive people” who believed in wax images and the philosopher’s stone. Being bound to unsatisfying jobs leads to people feeling alienated and a greater sense of hostility and anxiety as they grapple with their status. Milner then draws an offensive parallel, calling this struggle the “new slavery”: “Here is a new kind of slavery; not the literal bondage of old, nor the later, symbolic bondage of a social order with everyone in his predestined place, but the inner psychological bondage of our time—slavery to ourselves.” Milner concludes that the middle class is subservient to the touchstone fallacy and has become “little people” who now need to take back control to live at a human level. This erasure of all other groups barring the middle class seems to misunderstand societal structure and struggle to such an extent that one only hopes Marilyn took no notice of it whatsoever.

Milner’s book does, however, contain a quote from Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet* (first published in 1923 and never out of print). This is one of the bestselling books of all time, and Marilyn added generously to the tens of millions of sales figures by owning at least four copies. The book had two surges in popularity, in the 1930s and again in the 1960s, when it became an important book for the American counterculture. (Marilyn was reading counterculture books too.) The premise of the story is that a prophet, Al Mustafa, is about to set sail for his homeland (a euphemism for dying), and before he goes a local seer woman named Almitra asks him to share his life wisdom. He does this through twenty-six prose-poem fables that cover just about every stage of life: love, marriage, children, eating, drinking, work, crime, passion, pain, friendship, beauty, religion, and death. But, and this is why Marilyn was drawn to the book, Gibran does this in a nondogmatic, nonjudgmental way, meaning it appeals to many different people from

many different religions or no religion at all. Furthermore, because of the vast range of subjects covered, “This book has a way of speaking to people at different stages in their lives. It has this magical quality, the more you read it the more you come to understand the words,” says Reverend Laurie Sue, an interfaith minister in New York. Gibran’s book was never accepted into the literary canon because it was seen to appeal to the masses, which says more about the snobbery of the canon of the time than it does about Gibran’s book.

Aside from owning four copies, Marilyn also bought the book as gifts for various people. She found *The Prophet* not only inspiring but a pattern for everyday living and would sometimes read it on set between takes. The passage on marriage especially captured her while she was filming *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Having read the advice that married people should be close but not too close—“stand together yet not too near together”—she asked Jane Russell if she thought this was true. One concern Marilyn had about marriage was ensuring that she never had to give up her own identity; “I mean if a woman loves a man does she have to give up her own individuality?” she asked Russell. Words such as these from Gibran were welcomed. It’s also easy to see why this book was adopted by the counterculture movement. Gibran despised the oppression of women, or tyranny of any sort, in contrast to 1950s America where women were not supposed to have any real autonomy. But aside from the blueprint for life, the book is underappreciated for the beauty of its poetry. When discussing the nature of death and why there is no need to fear it, Gibran writes, “For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?”

Speaking of death, another book that was on Marilyn’s shelves also tackles this subject, along with notions of self-destructiveness. In *Man Against Himself* (1938), Karl Menninger argues that the desire to hurt oneself is really a misdirection of the survival instinct. The aggression needed for self-survival is turned inward, resulting in self-harm and suicidal ideation. Although I’m no psychologist, I suspect Menninger’s theories should be approached with caution since other claims in the book are that masturbation is a bad habit that causes children to bite their nails, homosexuality is a perversion, and he doesn’t really like sociologists. But if we leave that aside for the moment, Menninger was building on the Freudian idea of self-harm. Given he was writing about this in 1938, it is rather impressive since suicide had even more stigma attached to it then, a point noted by Menninger: “So great is the taboo on suicide that some people will not say the word, some newspapers will not print an account of it, and even scientists have avoided it as a subject for research.” Marilyn’s copy of this book is now in private hands, but the owner did post some information, revealing that Marilyn annotated passages in the first chapter dealing with suicide, with further marginalia throughout. The two annotations that are visible from the image posted online are Marilyn marking in light pencil lines Menninger’s claim that suicide is complex and that it is essential to explore what the conscious and unconscious motivations are that gets a person to that stage in the first place. Marilyn understood the suicidal impulse, once writing a draft poem in 1956 that reads:

Help Help
Help
I feel life coming closer
when all I want
is to die.

She fantasized about throwing herself off a bridge, exclaiming, “Oh damn I wish that I were / dead—absolutely nonexistent— / gone away from here...” Yet Marilyn worked hard in therapy to understand where these feelings came from, and her diary notes show her pondering the cause of her depression. Menninger’s aim was to show that self-knowledge can help bring about self-respect, and for that reason alone it is understandable why Marilyn owned a copy and read it so carefully.

There are many other self-help books on Marilyn’s shelves aimed at inspiring success and self-mastery. Titles include *The Miracles of Your Mind* by Joseph Murphy (1953), *The Magic of Believing* by Claude M. Bristol (1948), *Peace of Mind* by Joshua Loth Liebman (1946), *The Use of the Self* by F. Matthias Alexander (1932), and *TNT: The Power Within You* (1954) by Claude M. Bristol.

In existing diary notes, it is possible to see how Marilyn tried to apply some of this wisdom to everyday life by writing herself lists of rules and instructions. And as an aside, this is a technique that was also used by Sylvia Plath, who was advised to make daily lists by her therapist so at the end of each day she could see what she had achieved. Marilyn’s lists (much like Plath’s) are exhausting to read as she piled pressure on herself to attend multiple classes and sessions, work on acting assignments, find a body coach, observe other people’s classes, work through phobias, make “much much much more more more more effort in my analysis,” be on time, find out the meaning of certain words, and perhaps most poignantly, “try to enjoy myself when I can—I’ll be miserable enough as it is.”

There is no doubt that the notion of self-help was crucial to Marilyn’s attempts to be a happier person, or at least someone who understood herself better. She knew that her childhood had created trauma, which needed to be resolved, but she also understood that care and compassion for this was not going to come from those around her in the studio system. Like many creative women, the energy needed to work and succeed within a patriarchal industry took its toll. Marilyn is underestimated for her attempts to deal with this struggle. Often her (sometimes) dependence on alcohol and drugs and various psychiatrists is regarded as a feature of her mental instability, another “crazy woman,” when in fact many of Marilyn’s problems were due to the pressures of environmental factors: abandonment, abuse, exploitation, and the delight taken in humiliating the efforts she made to improve herself. She really had no one to support her with this other than professionals she paid, and even then, their techniques were sometimes questionable. Right up to the end she put her faith in therapy and therapists: “I hope at some future time to be able to make a glowing report about the wonders that psychoanalysis can achieve. The time is not ripe.” For Marilyn, it never would be.

Was Marilyn a misunderstood intellectual?



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There is little doubt that Marilyn was misunderstood both personally and professionally. She was repeatedly underestimated and ridiculed and seemed to constantly surprise certain people when she turned out to be nothing like her celebrity persona. But to say Marilyn was an intellectual feels like a step too far, depending on how you define the word. She was certainly highly intelligent, emotionally intelligent, and an engaged and curious thinker. Henry Hathaway, who directed Marilyn in *Niagara*, noticed that she was “really bright. She may not have had an education... she was naturally bright.” But she was not part of the intelligentsia. Neither was she engaged traditionally in mental labor like a professor or researcher would be. Her educational background left her at a disadvantage to inhabit these worlds. But defining what it means to be an intellectual is complicated because there are dictionary definitions and then there are cultural representations. If we were to rely on the latter, we could say without hesitation that Marilyn was not an intellectual. But if we explore some of the dictionary definitions, it becomes a little less certain.

Marilyn left high school after the tenth grade, and even during that final year switched schools halfway through when her foster family relocated. She married at sixteen without graduating, something that bothered her for the rest of her life. Although she understood that this left her with certain disadvantages, she still believed that a lack of formal education “is never a basic cause for a material problem—it is the emotional background that matters.” In essence, Marilyn is correct, but her comment does seem to gloss over all the ways in which a formal education offers a person a certain set of advantages. Of course, it is possible to try to “catch up” on knowledge, go back to school, engage in self-improvement programs. But it is not that easy. If you come from the sort of background Marilyn came from several factors intersect, and intelligence is one of the least significant.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu outlined why things such as how intelligent you appear can be based on the type of “capital” you grow up with. At the root of this is economic capital; the richer you are the more social status you are likely to hold. Marilyn grew up in relative poverty, at one stage spending almost two years in an orphanage. As a child, she had zero economic capital. But Bourdieu points out how economic capital links to two other sorts of capital that are just as important: cultural capital and social capital. Cultural capital is the sort of knowledge, skills, and taste you acquire through your upbringing and social standing, such as how to use cutlery in a fancy restaurant, and recognizing certain pieces of music or literary passages. You can embody this type of cultural capital by almost unconsciously soaking it up if you grow up surrounded by family and friends who already have this advantage. It just becomes part of who you are and can even be reflected in the objects you own. Children who grow up in a house filled with books, music, and art will just know about these things as part of their everyday lives. Once again, Marilyn had very little cultural capital growing up as she bounced from one

foster home to another. Consequently, this fed into her lack of social capital. Bourdieu sees social capital as directly linked to class. The higher your socioeconomic background, the more cultural and social capital you are likely to have. Social capital is not just linked to your status, but is about knowing how to negotiate certain situations with confidence, knowing what is regarded as “good” and “bad” taste, knowing the right people, and being a member of certain groups.

Bourdieu believed that it was possible to gain more cultural and social capital, but that it would be impossible to ever gain as much as if you grew up with it. A result of this is that if you try to improve yourself and move in social circles outside those you were born in, you spend your life being terrified of being “found out.” The reason I’m spending so long talking about Bourdieu and his ideas of capital is because they perfectly encapsulate what Marilyn experienced. Her difficult beginnings, where she lacked economic, cultural, and social capital, never left her. She was constantly worried about making blunders, and she had little confidence in her intelligence. W. J. Weatherby once asked her if she had read any J. D. Salinger and she met his question with a hostile silence. He noticed she was always ashamed and embarrassed not to have heard of certain writers or read their books. On another occasion he mentioned Balzac to her, and she looked unsure and worried, and asked him, “The French writer?” When he replied yes, she looked relieved, relaxed, and joined in the conversation. Bourdieu claimed you can try to “pass” as having higher capital than you were born with, but it will be stressful. In reality, you can never fully catch up. And people who were born with economic, cultural, and social capital can recognize those who weren’t a mile off.

Nevertheless, in 1951 Marilyn enrolled in a ten-week adult-extension program at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) studying world literature (which gives us some hint as to why her bookshelves contained novels from all over the globe). She told her legal guardian Grace Goddard that she wanted to expand her horizons. A further class she took, called Backgrounds of Literature, explored historical periods, social and cultural movements, and the literature produced in them. By this stage, Marilyn had appeared in *The Asphalt Jungle* and *All About Eve*, so she was much more recognizable. Sometimes during class boys would pop their heads through the door to look at her. Although she dressed modestly and tried to fit in, of course she stood out. According to scholar Elisa Jordan, Marilyn’s teacher, Claire Seay, finally asked others in the class who she was, and when they told her she replied, “And I took her for a young girl straight out of a convent!” Marilyn thought this a huge compliment. She was excited that there was a new genius to discover every day. Some publicity photographs were taken by Mel Traxel for *Movie Days* magazine in 1952 showing Marilyn standing in front of Royce Hall on campus and in the university library. Yet in her acting world, she noticed that when she was interviewed, journalists never asked her what she was reading or what she did between films. It simply didn’t occur to them that she was a serious university student studying literature. During these classes she discovered art and writers and studied the Renaissance, which made her drolly exclaim, “At night I lay in bed wishing I could have lived in the Renaissance. Of course if I’d lived in the Renaissance I would be dead by now.” Marilyn’s bookshelves contained many art books from her time at UCLA, books on Goya, Michelangelo, and

Giovannetti. These volumes appear repeatedly in the background of press shots taken in her hotel suites and apartments. It is remarkable that no one asked about her literary life.

So, if we define *intellectual* as being engaged in the study of intellectual pursuits in a formal setting, Marilyn would fall under this label. But she was not just a student or a reader. Marilyn was also a critic and a writer. Both these things fed equally into her literary life. We have already seen how, as she developed as an actor, she became more engaged with critiquing her scripts, understanding what would work, and what was and was not funny. She could tell what sort of writing would be effective on-screen, something many writers who had never produced screenplays before could not understand. This had long been an issue in Hollywood, starting when studio executives lured the literary greats from New York to write for films to give their movies some sort of literary cachet. F. Scott Fitzgerald struggled to make his writing translate to the screen. Because she had read widely—plays, radio plays, delivered lines in acting classes and on-screen—Marilyn understood the rhythm of words, the cadences, and the interactions needed. Another of her strengths was her eye for humor. She delivered this so effortlessly it was almost as though she was not acting at all. But, of course, huge amounts of work had gone into her performance. She could tell by reading words on a page whether they would be funny on-screen.

Sometimes her everyday interactions resulted in her critiquing novels or poetry. During the filming of *The Prince and the Showgirl* Marilyn struck up a friendship with Alan, a student pianist. In between his music commitments he was studying the poetry of Walt Whitman, and when he told Marilyn, she chose an extract so that they could discuss it together. She told him everything she knew about Whitman, which, to his surprise, was extensive. She looked over a paper he was writing and helped him with a tricky passage, writing annotations and tips in the margin. She suggested to him, about a certain Whitman poem, “This has to be read lovingly, doesn’t it?”

A columnist for *Picturegoer* magazine, Tom Hutchinson, was sent to interview Marilyn during this time. Afterward, when the press and publicity team had gone and they were alone, he found himself discussing *The Trial* by Franz Kafka. Marilyn spoke to him about the novel’s main theme of guilt. (The plot centers on Josef K, who is prosecuted for a crime but never told what he has done, and the reader never finds out either.) She told Hutchinson that she believed all humans felt that they had fallen in some way. A copy of *The Trial* was not in Marilyn’s personal library at the time of her death.

But Marilyn was not always so keen to meet critics. During her stay in London, she was invited to a dinner party thrown in her honor by the theater critic Kenneth Tynan and his wife, the author Elaine Dundy. (It would be two years yet before she wrote her bestselling novel *The Dud Avocado*.) They chose the ten other guests carefully, including actor-dancer Leslie Caron, actor-playwright John Osborne, and literary critic and writer Cyril Connolly, among others. An hour before the dinner Arthur Miller phoned Tynan to say that Marilyn would not be attending but he would. Then fifteen minutes later he called back to say they would both be coming after all. And then five minutes later sent a message that neither would be attending. “My wife,” Miller told Tynan, “is hysterical.” “So is mine,” replied Tynan, in a touching moment of patriarchal bonding between the

two husbands.

In one of Marilyn's last interviews in 1962 she was using writers to critique her own life and talent, telling journalist Richard Meryman, "Goethe said 'Talent is developed in privacy,' you know? And it's really true. There is a need for aloneness which I don't think most people realize for an actor." Ten years earlier, the same magazine, *Life*, had noted in passing that Marilyn "sprinkles her conversation with lines from Thomas Wolfe and Browning," and that she was devoted to the intellectual life despite never finishing high school. Which means that if we take the definition of *intellectual* as "a person who engages with a critical evaluation of ideas and issues," then Marilyn falls into the category here too.

Just what sort of ideas and issues Marilyn was reading about can be seen by pulling random books off her shelf. Aside from some classic and modern world literature, there were other books tackling war, sex workers, socialism, and gender politics.

Night by Francis Pollini is a novel that deals with the experiences of US prisoners during the Korean War and the type of brainwashing techniques they were exposed to by their Chinese captors. This book had been rejected by several American publishers due to its sexually explicit language and what was regarded as an uncomfortable subject for American readers, but in 1960 the Olympia Press published the first American edition. (Marilyn had a 1960 edition but one that was published in Paris.)

Kingdom of the Rocks by Consuelo de Saint-Exupéry (1946) was another book dealing with the challenges of surviving war. The author was married to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the author of one of Marilyn's favorite books, *The Little Prince*. She was also an artist and moved in Surrealist circles. *Kingdom of the Rocks* tells the story (a memoir) of a group of art students based in Marseilles who fled the Nazi occupation in 1942 to take refuge in the deserted, ruined medieval town of Oppède-les-Vieux in Provence. Here they set up a socialist community, an artists' colony, and a makeshift school so that they could continue with their studies. They called it "the Kingdom of the Rocks" to reflect the rugged environment. The book recounts their dramas, romances, and adventures, some which may or may not have been true given that the author acknowledged she "lived in the realm of fantasy."

A book about postwar life called *The Dancing Bear* by Edzard Schaper was published in 1961. It tells the story of a young Lithuanian refugee, Oscar Stepunat, forced to live a nomadic existence moving from one camp to another. Deciding to move to Switzerland for a better chance at life, he gains a work visa and encounters a photographer, Lacis, who offers him a job as his assistant. This involves dressing up in a bear suit and dancing to attract tourists to have their photographs taken against the backdrop of the Alps. The book explores the growing number of tourists that emerged in the aftermath of the war and muses upon why people want their photographs taken in front of famous places and monuments. As Oscar the Bear, the narrator describes the dehumanizing and destructive effects of being encased in the suit, trapped in a false identity, performing for others. This takes its toll both physically and emotionally. There would certainly be themes here Marilyn could identify with, notably the destructiveness of living with an identity that does not feel like your own and the expectations of performance. In many ways, Oscar's

story reads as an allegory of Marilyn's life in Hollywood.

The Call Girl by Harold Greenwald is a book that explores the psychology of call girls. A surprising bestseller in 1958, this social and psychoanalytic study was based on research Greenwald had carried out for his doctoral dissertation. In 1960 he made a film based on the book called *Girl of the Night*, starring Anne Francis. This was still the time when any discussion of gender politics tended to be dominated by male voices, but to be fair to Greenwald, he created an innovative study to allow women's voices to be heard. As a psychoanalyst, he noticed many of his patients were what he referred to as "call girls." Deciding to carry out a study, he realized there would be problems of access, so he trained three—let's switch vocabulary here—sex workers in interview techniques, and they interviewed another ten sex workers. Greenwald interviewed ten himself, along with six others who were his patients. The book explores the social and professional life of sex workers, and details psychoanalytic studies exploring why women chose the profession, with a final section that looks at the role of pimps and clients. However, Greenwald focused only on what he called "the aristocrats of prostitution," women who live in the most expensive areas, wear expensive clothes, and "charge a minimum of twenty dollars per sexual contact." He contrasts these women with their "less successful sisters of the street." Greenwald's aim is clearly stated on page three of his introduction—he wants to find out more about women in general, the motivations of men, and why some men can only function sexually with "prostitutes." In the era before second-wave feminism Marilyn was clearly exploring gender issues that were still taboo.

This can also be seen in another book on her shelf, *Troubled Women*, edited by Lucy Freeman and published in 1959. Freeman was well known for her articles on mental health and psychiatry, which were published in *The New York Times* from 1940 on. As these were still regarded as taboo subjects, she urged other editors to cover them and was a central figure in helping move toward destigmatizing discussions of mental health. Freeman also played a role in helping to preserve Freud's private papers and archive, writing books about him and psychiatry in general. *Troubled Women* contains true stories about the inner lives, fears, and desires of women as reported by their psychoanalysts, who then offered interpretations. Once again, it was another book putting women's voices out into the world. Freeman's first book, *Fight Against Fears*, had been about her own struggles as a shy young woman with a quiet voice and social anxiety. In 1992 Freeman would write a book called *Why Norma Jean Killed Marilyn Monroe*, a psychological study of how Marilyn's sadness and sorrow resulted in suicide. In particular, Freeman blamed Monroe's childhood, which left her fearful and hurt, noting that "such feelings never disappear. They remain as subtle murderers of the mind, slowly building up their destructive power if we do not become aware of how dangerous they are." The book was dedicated to all people whose terror of their childhood experiences created suicidal feelings. And in another literary link from Marilyn's bookshelves, Harold Greenwald provided a blurb for the book, writing, "Marilyn Monroe represents a fascinating example of the duality of the human psyche."

This selection of books shows that Marilyn had an interest in social issues both on a global and individual level. Living in the historical moment that she did, it is not

surprising that many of her books dealt with the impact and aftermath of war. She would have been nineteen when World War II ended. Neither is it surprising that as gender politics were heating up, she was reading books that centered women's voices. Another definition of *intellectual* is "appealing to or requiring the use of the intellect," so again it would seem that much of Marilyn's reading material (and interests) places her safely within this definition.

But there is external evidence too, from people who met and knew her—and some were part of the intelligentsia themselves. Dame Edith Sitwell commented on Marilyn's "extreme intelligence." The poet Carl Sandburg became a friend toward the end of her life. Sandburg, who won the Pulitzer Prize three times, once for his biography of Abraham Lincoln, which Marilyn had read religiously, formed a platonic relationship with Monroe both in Hollywood and New York. Since she was a young girl and had received a top grade in high school for an essay she wrote on Lincoln, Marilyn had been obsessed, telling biographer Maurice Zolotow, "My father is Abraham Lincoln—I mean I think of Lincoln as my father. He was wise and kind and good. He is my ideal, Lincoln. I love him." (This takes on shades of an Electra complex when Monroe claimed Arthur Miller reminded her of Lincoln.) Sandburg, a major figure in American literature, was charmed by Marilyn's intelligence and wit. "She was a good talker," he said and noticed that "she was not the usual movie idol. There was something democratic about her. Why, she was the type who would join in and wash the supper dishes even if you didn't ask her." Although he noticed there were areas where Marilyn was not at home (science/politics/economics), he found her well-informed with a vitality and ready sense of humor. Employees at Fox remembered them in the 1960s emerging from their "apartment dressing rooms" at lunchtime to walk down the road hand in hand while Sandburg was working on the screenplay for *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Marilyn bought a bust of Sandburg in New York, black-painted terra-cotta, ten inches high, and mounted on a solid wooden plinth with a brass plaque bearing his name. She valued it so much that she even shipped it across the country to display in her Brentwood home. Touching photographs exist of some of their meetings in New York, the most memorable taken by Arnold Newman in 1962 as Sandburg shows Marilyn an exercise to help with insomnia (she is standing behind him, barefoot, copying his moves), and as Marilyn shows Sandburg how to dance (he stays on the sofa). After her death Joe DiMaggio asked Sandburg to deliver the eulogy at Marilyn's funeral but he was too sick to travel. He did say though, "She never fully realized herself. The best years were ahead of her, the best years were the years to come." He felt that had he been able to see or talk to her in August 1962, he would have been able to save her.

Carl Sandburg was not the only poet-writer to notice Marilyn's intelligence. Norman Rosten and his wife Hedda and daughter Patricia met Monroe in the spring of 1955 and formed a friendship that lasted until Marilyn's death. They were introduced by the photographer Sam Shaw, who turned up at the Rostens' home during a rainstorm with a bedraggled woman in tow. They did not immediately recognize Marilyn Monroe. As the friendship grew, Rosten noticed that "what she lacked in formal education she made up for in curiosity, and a kind of unschooled knowledge. When she talked about books her

enthusiasm bubbled over.” Yet Rosten reveals yet another facet to us—Marilyn as writer. For years Monroe had jotted down notes and ideas, and some unfinished poems. She would send these scribbled sheets through the mail to Rosten and ask him, “Do you think there is poetry in there?” She wanted him to critique them, and he felt “the poems were amateur with little knowledge of craft but were a kind of therapy.” Just as no one had ever told Marilyn what to read, no one ever told her how to write, yet there is a lyricism and beauty to her work:

Life—

I am both of your directions

Life

Somehow remaining hanging downward

the most

but strong as a cobweb in the

wind—I exist more with the cold glistening frost.

She would send him silly little verses (“Norman so hard to please / when all I want is to tease”) and in turn he would share his poetry with her. They did cultural things together, such as visiting the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York to see the Rodin exhibition. She especially liked *Pygmalion and Galatea* and *The Hand of God*. (Incidentally, there is a beautiful photograph of Marilyn looking at a Degas sculpture taken by Joshua Logan in Los Angeles, in 1956.) Rosten could not help but note that “she had a poet within her.”

What is forming here is a picture of Marilyn as reader, writer, and critic. Her lack of formal education perhaps excluded her from being regarded as a traditional intellectual. And her lack of social and cultural capital, combined with her studio-created sexpot image, did nothing but cement the myth of her as the “dumb blonde.” But myths are not facts, they are socially constructed, and anything that is constructed can be changed. Marilyn was misunderstood and spent much of her life engaged in intellectual pursuits. This is another reason why she needs to be recast and reimagined: not the late, not the ditzy, not the bombshell, not the difficult, but the intelligent Marilyn Monroe.

Why did Marilyn treasure her books?



JOURNALIST: If your house was on fire and you had to save one thing, what would it be?

MARILYN: Books.

The writer Anne Sexton once said, “I collect books. They are people who don’t leave.” Marilyn’s origin story of an unsettled childhood saw people come and go in her life, her mother included. In 1962 she told journalist Theo Wilson, “I have two good memories of my childhood and I cherish them dearly.” When you have little growing up, whether that is affection, love, or material possessions, you tend to treasure the few things you do have. Photographs of a very young Marilyn, then Norma Jeane, often show her in worn clothing (in one picture you can even see the holes in her clothes). She did not own much as a child, and even if she did live in houses that had more possessions, she was never there long enough to fully benefit from them. Marilyn spent most of her life looking for love and care and trying to please people. All her biographies show husbands coming and going, sporadic appearances by family members, short-lived professional associations, some longer-term friends, and paid-for medical care. The one thing that did stay constant in Marilyn’s life was her books. A few from her childhood, and then an increasing number as she became more financially secure.

If you like books and are lucky enough to live surrounded by books, you notice when they are not there. Visiting someone’s house who doesn’t have books can sometimes produce an uncanny feeling of “something’s missing” until you realize it is because there are no visible books. Then a room seems to have a sort of wordy silence. It’s a hard feeling to explain, but an odd echo, though not quite an echo because there is nothing there in the first place. More a peculiar sort of emptiness. And if you do treasure your books, as Marilyn did, there can be multifaceted reasons why. Books somehow manage to span the emotional, intellectual, and social worlds we inhabit. As Sexton suggested, books are emotional constants, they don’t leave of their own accord. They ask nothing of us, but sit and wait to engage us, our silent companions through the years. In this sense they are like little literary time capsules capturing our memories, desires, wishes, and goals. Opening a book can be like a sudden burst of emotional glitter showering us with nostalgia, and a whole range of emotional attachments. Those pages archive our inner literary journeys. Which also means treasuring books is connected to our sense of identity. The books we own, display, and read are a form of self-expression. Occasionally articles will appear that take the more cynical route, claiming people who treasure and display books are employed in some form of intellectual bragging or clever posturing. This perspective seems sad and suspicious. Books, as well as being our constant companions, also benefit from rereading. They don’t have to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. And if you visit someone’s house and are drawn to their bookshelves, then truly beautiful conversations can happen: shared likes and dislikes, enthusiasms, sometimes even going home with a new TBR list. So, for Marilyn, as well as telling us something about her reading preferences, her bookshelves are an instant shortcut to demolishing her tiresome “dumb blonde” stereotype. Because anyone who actually spoke to Marilyn about her books

realized immediately they were not there for ornamentation, but that she read them carefully and had a *lot* of thoughts about them. Which is yet another reason to treasure books—they allow you to join in all sorts of cultural conversations, especially in an environment like a film set where everyone often seemed to read the same book. And then sometimes you just get those books that spark a cultural moment, the book that everyone is talking about, and you can see plenty of those in Marilyn's library, whether they were banned books, countercultural books, or the bestselling fiction of the time.

Essentially then, books offer us a visual embodiment of our literary journeys. If you have books, just scan even one shelf and see what it does to you, from your latest purchases, right back to some of the most emotional, evocative treasures from childhood. It is like a memory kaleidoscope, shifting and revealing.

Childhood is a good place to start. The children's books that were in Marilyn's personal library seem to have been with her all her life. There weren't many. One was a religious instruction book, *Catechism for Young Children*, dated 1936, which would have made Marilyn ten when it was published. Another was *The Little Engine That Could* by Watty Piper (1930). Both were sold by Christie's in 1999. One page at the end of *The Little Engine* contains a child's scrawl, large swirly black circles in pencil that may or may not have been made by the young Marilyn. Watty Piper was the pen name of Arnold Munk, part owner of the company Platt & Munk, which published *The Little Engine That Could*, a retelling of an earlier story written by Mabel C. Bragg. Essentially, this is a tale about a small locomotive engine that is the only engine willing to try and pull a large, heavy, broken-down train over a mountain. Other engines refuse to do it because they think they are too important, so the small train decides to give it a go, repeating the motto "I think I can." Slowly the little engine pulls the broken-down train over the mountain with much hard work and bravery. As it tops the mountain and heads back down, the mantra changes to "I thought I could" (this is the page in Marilyn's copy with the pencil scrawl). The book is about teaching children the importance of bravery, optimism, and hard work. It also seems to be a book about courage, which is something the young Marilyn, and the older one, frequently needed. There is a story that the daughter of Marilyn's psychiatrist Dr. Greenson gave a copy of this book to Marilyn in 1962, when she was feeling nervous about traveling to New York for her famous "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" performance. Given that Marilyn's copy dates from 1930, and that it was reissued many times over the years, it is tempting to think this was her own copy from childhood, and that perhaps the one she was loaned in 1962 would have a later publishing date. We simply don't know.

All other books from Marilyn's childhood in her library were religious and, in particular, connected to Christian Science. She had two books by Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of the church, called *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1934) and *Poems, including Christ and Christmas* (1925). Marilyn's mother Gladys was deeply committed to Christian Science most of her life; in fact, some described her interest as obsessive, so it's possible at least one of these books once belonged to her. But another significant figure from Marilyn's childhood was Ana Lower, "Aunt Ana," who was also an adherent to Christian Science. The copy of *Science and Health with Key to the*

Scriptures that was in Marilyn's library was inscribed by Ana to Marilyn and gifted to her just before Aunt Ana died. In his book *Marilyn*, Norman Mailer, who presumably saw the book, writes that the inscription read, "Norma dear, read this book. I do not leave you much except my love, but not even death can diminish that; nor will death ever take me far away from you." Little wonder Marilyn cherished this book with such a loving inscription.

There are also reports that Ana left Marilyn another book, sometimes referred to as *The Potter*. The most likely book this could have been in Marilyn's library is another religious book called *And It Was Told of a Certain Potter* by Walter C. Lanyon (published in 1917, but this copy dates from 1922). This book contains eleven parables sharing the experiences and wisdom of Abd Allah (the potter of the title) and sometimes features his friend Jethro, both of whom live in Jerusalem. The parable titles include "The Woman Who Was Poor," "The Power of Silence," and "The House That Stood in Darkness." The main moral of the book is "Love is the only active element of the Universe. Be sure you are filled with love all the while—let naught else into your consciousness..." But other messages include: always try to be grateful, to be kind, to trust God, and to not make any unnecessary noise or shout at each other. "What is so impressive as silence, and what carries with it so much dignity? It is the very essence of self-control and authority, and what is more pitiful than a man overcome of his anger?" Marilyn's copy also contained newspaper clippings of prayers and poems. Marilyn said of her aunt Ana, "She changed my whole life. She was the first person in the world I ever really loved and she loved me. She was a wonderful human being. I once wrote a poem about her... it was called 'I Love Her.' She never hurt me, not once. She couldn't. She was all kindness and all love. She was good to me." She was also one of the few people in Marilyn's life who encouraged her to become an actor, believing she would be a great success. It was a source of sadness to Marilyn that Ana died in 1948, before she saw her belief come true. It is easy to see why these books would have been kept safe, like treasured heirlooms, from a family that had few.

But beyond this, and already discussed above, books are like companions who stay with you. They ease loneliness, they comfort, they can make us laugh, they can show us other people suffer, they offer hope. Plus, books don't have to be financially valuable to be treasured. The physicality of a book, the solidness, the smell, the act of curling up and turning the pages is a ritual that can please body and mind, almost an act of self-love or care.

Marilyn owned many books that were gifted and signed by their authors, which is always a special thing to treasure. So are first or limited editions. One standout from her library is a delightful first edition, presentation copy of *Frankie and Johnny* by John Huston (1930), with illustrations by Miguel Covarrubias. This was a play for a puppet show based on the story of the ill-fated lovers (no spoilers—it's dramatic), inspired by an interview Huston had with one of their old neighbors. At 176 pages, the book contains not only Huston's play but an older version of the folktale and twenty more versions of the story and song. The first ballad appeared in 1899 and went through various incarnations, becoming a traditional American popular song. But it is the inscription that

must have delighted Marilyn, which read, “*Marilyn dear / all those years ago when you were hardly born I wrote this for you—the perfect Frankie—Johnny (himself) Huston.*” It is not only beautifully illustrated, but it came with sentiments from a major Hollywood director who took Marilyn seriously.

Which links to all her heavily annotated copies of plays by other writers, such as Tennessee Williams and Clifford Odets. These books reveal all the hard work Marilyn had put into her craft over the years, overcoming stage fright at the Actors Studio, impressing Lee Strasberg and Michael Chekhov. They contain her triumphs as well as her struggles. They map and illustrate her professional life, something she could easily revisit in moments of self-doubt.

This revisiting is a really important point. Books are not supposed to be fleeting things. Ideally, they are written to have longevity and to travel with their thoughts and ideas through time. You would not listen to the first performance of a Verdi opera and then suggest he destroy the sheet music. You would not throw away a book just because you had read it once, or in Marilyn’s case had finished studying it. As an actor Marilyn had a keen understanding of legacy, of committing something to the screen or the page and hoping, even knowing, that it would stay there.

Objects can give us so much. Their solidity belies their emotional depth. And there is something that always remains just a little bit elusive about books, the way paper and ink can unfold and uncover other worlds, other lives, other times. No wonder we love them. Cherishing rare possessions from childhood, holding on to expressions of love, knowing the value of reading, exercising an inquiring mind, loving books, seeing books as companions, and understanding their historical worth and potential are all reasons why Marilyn so treasured her books.

*Why is reading such an important part of
Marilyn's legacy?*



As shelf-snooping Marilyn's books comes to an end, there is one final point to consider. Why should reading be an important part of Marilyn's legacy? I do not think this question takes long to answer.

In recent years, there has been so much positive revisionist work taking place regarding Marilyn's legacy through scholarship, memoirs, and TV documentaries that recast, reframe, and release her from the stereotype she had become trapped in. But it does not yet feel secure. Every so often another depressing representation slips through that feels regressive, and frankly, insulting. Much of the positive blasting away of old myths quite rightly stresses Marilyn's talent, her intelligence, her wit, and her business acumen. Often these accounts include as an aside just how avid a reader Marilyn was. I would like to slightly shift the focus with my shelf-snooping and center Marilyn's reading to a much more prominent position. As this book has explored, her talent and skills at acting, her intelligent and lively mind, and her ambition, courage, and humor came from her reading. All those hours poring over books that taught acting techniques—and reading radio and stage plays to understand character and dialogue, classic literature to expand her mind, and stories to help her gain empathy and kindness and an understanding of human emotion—helped her create the dazzling woman we see on-screen. Books that she wanted to film with her production company formed the foundation of her business mind. The philosophy she discussed with other writers by reading their work and then sharing her own placed her in worlds of intelligence and creativity. Learning about the biographies of other figures in the movie industry who fought their way to the top, and knowing that they struggled too, made her battles possible.

The American novelist Walter Mosley once said that you can learn everything you need to know about a person by looking at their bookshelves, and this really is true. Marilyn's books reveal more to us about her than just about anything else, and that is why her reading, and her literary life, should be treated as one of the most important parts of her legacy and her achievements.

EPILOGUE

Daydreaming and Departure



Night has now fallen on Fifth Helena Drive. The twilight hues have given way to a midnight blue, and there is nothing visible from Marilyn's windows other than my reflection staring back. The house is still empty, but the logs flame, never burning away. They will never burn away. Marilyn's copy of Dylan Thomas has slipped from my grasp, and I wonder if I was asleep. A dream within a daydream.

On Hollywood Boulevard, the neons buzz and flicker to life, the bookstores filling with after-work browsers. The warm blast of the streets, pungent. Down the road in Santa Monica, the sluggish sea will be trawling and slapping beneath the pier, salty and seaweedy, full of barnacles. The gulls have retired for the night, and the tourists are back in their hotels. Sometimes Marilyn would drive there late at night when she could not sleep and walk along the pier. She breathed in the salt air. There is something about the expanse of the sea. It relaxes and opens the mind. It makes anything seem possible, and it makes any questions, with their answers, wash back over you like the tide.

My shelf-snooping has revealed to me an entirely other Marilyn. The one who danced with Carl Sandburg. The one who drove into Charlie Chaplin's tennis net with a drunken Dylan Thomas. The one who Jean Cocteau and Jean-Paul Sartre thought wonderful. The one who Edith Sitwell adored, and that Carson McCullers kissed on the cheek. The one who appeared in a James Bond book, a Nabokov novel, and an Arthur Miller story. The one who was gifted signed first editions from admiring authors and the Marilyn who kept books from her childhood that belonged to the one person who loved her the most. I see the other Marilyn, who didn't just appear on a film set and deliver her lines, but the one who spent so very long reading how to deliver her lines, working through her scripts, tapping into personal experiences to bring depth to her characters, however flimsily they were written. I see the other Marilyn, who built her personal library and her power.

I place Dylan Thomas back on the shelf and wonder where she is. I see by the telephone a white spring-binder address book. At the back of the binder is a supplement, the *Academy Players Directory*, listing names for studio casting personnel, writers' and artists' representatives, agents for TV and radio. As I flick through the other pages, I see numbers for Hunter's Books and Martindale's Book Store in LA and Scribner's bookstore in New York. I see phone numbers for Saul Bellow, Seán O'Casey, Clifford Odets, Norman Rosten, Carl Sandburg, Louis Untermeyer, and George Axelrod. All these writers, all these lives, just at the end of a telephone.

The night closes in on me. I know I have to leave but I do not want to go. As long as I stay here anything is possible, this story can have any ending.

I pick up the key and step over the tiled doorway. My journey here has ended. I close the door on the bookshelves and the colorful glasses and the fire that will always be burning. I lock the door and leave the key where I found it near the herbs, now even more

fragrant in the cool night air. I walk away down the redbrick path.

I feel an air of gentle sadness. I have missed Marilyn. I always miss Marilyn. Maybe in some world she is forever browsing stores, pulling out books, reading random sentences, deciding which to buy. Maybe she has lost herself in these books, coming alive again in the pages. I wish I had seen her, talked to her, watched her car lights sweeping across the drive, but she didn't arrive. I find myself on the other side of the scalloped wooden gates. The cul-de-sac is quiet. No one is around. My daydream has one final wish: that Marilyn will come home soon. She will, won't she?

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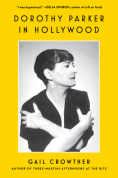
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There are a lot of spectacular women who made this book happen, not least Marilyn Monroe: actor, businesswoman, wit, writer, and, of course, reader.

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Hollywood at the Ritz**



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About the Author



Gail Crowther is a writer, researcher, and academic. She is the author of *Dorothy Parker in Hollywood*, *Three-Martini Afternoons at the Ritz: The Rebellion of Sylvia Plath & Anne Sexton*, and *The Haunted Reader and Sylvia Plath*, and the coauthor of *Sylvia Plath in Devon: A Year's Turning* and *These Ghostly Archives: The Unearthing of Sylvia Plath*. Gail divides her time between the North of England and London.

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Marilyn Monroe's Personal Library

Listed by genre in Christie's catalogue *The Personal Property of Marilyn Monroe* (1999) and containing full bibliographic details when available. The categorization was organized by Christie's for sale lots, so some books appear in surprising places. It has not been possible to check for any potential errors of listings since most books are now held in private collections.

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Carl Sandburg's six-volume *Biography of Abraham Lincoln*
The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
Poems of W. B. Yeats
Mister Johnson by Joyce Cary
The Thinking Body by Mabel Elsworth Todd
An Actor Prepares by Konstantin Stanislavski
The Bible
Duse: A Biography by William Weaver
De humani corporis fabrica (On the Fabric of the Human Body) by Andreas Vesalius
Essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson
Gertrude Lawrence as Mrs. A by Richard Aldrich
Good Night, Sweet Prince by Gene Fowler
Mythology by Edith Hamilton (duplicate)
Stanislavsky Directs by Nikolai Gorchakov
I Married Adventure by Osa Johnson
The Importance of Living by Lin Yutang
Letters to a Young Poet by Rainer Maria Rilke
The Psychopathology of Everyday Life by Sigmund Freud
The Rains Came by Louis Bromfield
Rights of Man by Thomas Paine
Swann's Way by Marcel Proust
To the Actor by Michael Chekhov
Captain Newman, M.D. by Leo Rosten
Songs for Patricia by Norman Rosten
A Lost Lady by Willa Cather
Lust for Life by Irving Stone
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